

Economists, unlike scientists, do a poor job of communicating via Twitter



It has become increasingly common for academics to use social media to communicate with wider audiences. Twitter, like many other social platforms, typically measures success in terms of numbers of followers, likes and re-tweets, but this only tells us something about the spreading of messages but not necessarily whether the content of the messages is understood or embraced. One way to ascertain this is through network and language analysis, which used together can tell us how effective the communication is.

Economists tweet less, mention fewer people and have fewer conversations with strangers than a comparable group of experts in the sciences, and use less accessible language with words that are more complex, with more abbreviations and with a more distant tone. Their tweets are less personal and less inclusive than those used by scientists.

This is what appeared in April 2017 when we gathered data on tens of thousands of tweets from the Twitter accounts of both the top 25 economists and 25 scientists as identified by IDEAS and Sciencemag, including the top three economists at the time, Paul Krugman, Joseph Stiglitz and Erik Brynjolfsson and, on the other side, the top three scientists Neil deGrasse Tyson, Brian Cox and Richard Dawkins. At that time those accounts covered roughly two thirds of all the following.

The timing is significant because 2016 has been declared the year of post-truth politics, the year in which appeals to emotions (pathos) superseded the significance of factual evidence-based information (logos), affecting people's constructions and interpretations of events. This has been accompanied by the growing prominence of political 'alt' movements (e.g. UKIP, Alt Right) and their aggressive, provocative and populist narratives, and 'fake news' leading to political shock events such as Brexit and the Trump election.

The relatively low traction of economists in these public debates has been and continues to be an important issue. Does the public not trust economists? Don't they understand what economists do and how they work? Is their work misrepresented in the media? And how do economists themselves interact with public opinion? We focus specifically on Twitter, as social text-based media sites are key tools in the dissemination of both information and populist rhetoric, which makes the ability of experts to fruitfully engage with the public in these networks and their analysis more important than ever.

We selected scientists specifically to understand whether economists engage less or less effectively than experts in fields characterised by a high degree of specialism and complexity, an often-heard justification for the [poor understanding](#) of what economists do by the public. We collected 64 121 tweets from the economists and 63 472 from the scientists, selecting the last 3 240 tweets from each person on the list (economists' tweets ranged from 02/11/2009 to 06/04/2017, the scientists' tweets from 09/12/2008 to 13/04/2017).

In terms of composition of both the sample and the ensuing networks, our study sadly confirms what we already know about [lack of diversity](#) in the profession. The language analysis of differences in *register* (a higher *register* is generally less accessible and thus more distanced) finds that economists use a higher number of complex words, specific names and abbreviations than scientists.

Furthermore, differences in pronoun use (which relate to a greater degree of involvement with the reader) show that highly inclusive pronouns such as 'we' and 'our' are used up to twice as often by scientists when compared to economists. This lends support to the [superiority of economists](#)' argument presented by Fourcade, Ollion and Algan, who link higher assertiveness and sense of superiority displayed by economists to higher remuneration, insularity and hierarchy than in the other social sciences.

This we believe feeds into both poor understanding and traction of economics with the general public, and continuing trends in (lack of) diversity, that are related to both implicit attitudes and institutional practices and are currently the focus of several initiatives at the Royal Economic Society, the European Economic Association and the American Economic Association.

The lesson for the profession is clear: when communicating with the public we need to change our approach. Stop talking AT others, but talk TO others and care about being understood. This chimes with advice recently offered by [Chris Dillow](#) who suggests remembering that people's beliefs cannot easily be challenged when they are related to their own identity (e.g. in the case of EU membership); that nobody should be talked down to; and finally and importantly that we should stick to facts and always be honest about the things we can and cannot research and the limitation of our own findings.



Notes:

- This blog post is based on the author's research, co-authored with Sylvia Jaworska and Danica Vukadinovic, and [presented](#) at the Royal Economic Society's annual conference at the University of Sussex in Brighton in March 2018.
- The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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