

Stuart A. Brown Keep off the Brexit barricades

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Keep off the Brexit barricades

Partisan social media posts typically get more attention, but dispassionate analyses are what academics are valued for, says Stuart Brown

As the war within the Conservative Party over what kind of Brexit the UK should seek reaches fever pitch, many academics may well be sorely tempted to speak out.

After all, many have a personal stake in, for instance, what the UK's post-Brexit immigration arrangements are, and many more have specific expertise in pertinent issues, such as how the European Union works, or how global trade is governed. Moreover, those academics who do actively endorse one side of the debate often gather large followings on social media.

But before others rush to emulate their example, they should take stock of the lessons that can be learned from academics' role in the vote that began the whole process of leaving the EU.

In many ways, the 2016 referendum was an ideal platform to showcase the relevance of academia to wider society. The EU has long been regarded as a relatively complex organisation, with British citizens [struggling](#) to recall even basic elements of its institutional structure in surveys. In addition, a general lack of trust in both the official [campaigns](#) and the [media](#) ensured that academics had an opportunity – some might say an *obligation* – to fill the gap by providing reliable information to citizens ahead of the vote.

Yet the referendum also demonstrated some of the dangers that polarised campaigns can pose for academic credibility. Accusations of bias became commonplace, driven by the belief that academia was broadly in favour of remaining in the EU. There were also clear parallels between Michael Gove's [assertion](#) that “people in this country have had enough of experts” and the kind of [anti-intellectualism](#) that has been observed in political discourse in other countries.

In a [new study, published in *European Political Science*](#), I underline the significance of these challenges by highlighting the competing pressures that academics face when engaging with politics. Based on an analysis of online contributions produced by academics in the six months prior to the Brexit vote, I show that the demands of political campaigns, coupled with the wider shift towards [quantifying](#) academic impact, can potentially create dangerous incentives for scholars when it comes to public engagement.

I find that those who published content that directly or indirectly supported the arguments of a particular side of the campaign – regardless of whether it was Leave or Remain – tended to attract far greater numbers of readers than those who produced more neutral, explanatory pieces.

This implies something of a collective action problem, in the sense that although all academics benefit from their credibility as experts, it may be profitable for individual academics to reach a wider audience by producing content that appeals to political

campaigners. If every scholar adopted this approach, the reputation of academia could come under threat from the perception of partisanship.

Exacerbating this problem is the fact that coverage afforded to academics during a campaign is far from equal. An [analysis](#) of academic quotes in the written press illustrates the point: although only 2 per cent of all quotes in established newspapers came from academics, 20 per cent of those were attributable to a single academic who was strongly linked to one side of the debate.

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.

One conclusion that should certainly not be drawn from my research is that neutrality should be avoided on the basis that it is likely to garner less engagement. Indeed, I found that even though pro-Leave and pro-Remain content tended to enjoy greater reach, there was still a notable appetite among readers for informed and balanced commentary.

Moreover, we should be extremely wary of conflating *popularity* with *value*. Readership numbers and social media shares are a measure of the quantity of people who engaged with a publication, but they say little about the quality of that engagement. There is already [ample evidence](#) to demonstrate that quantitative impact metrics alone are no guarantee of academic rigour.

Of course, it would be wrong to assume that academic contributions advocating a particular choice at the ballot box automatically pose a credibility problem. If the evidence points in a certain direction, there is little merit in remaining neutral for its own sake.

But a clear lesson from the Brexit referendum is that against the backdrop of highly polarised debates, the temptation to blur the lines between dispassionate analysis and political campaigning must be tempered with the realisation that one of the main reasons that citizens turn to academics is that they are viewed as being above the ranks of partisan campaigning.

There are enough people around to debate the characters of the likes of Theresa May, Boris Johnson and Jacob Rees-Mogg. We need academics because they can be relied upon to provide valuable expertise in a way that journalists, politicians and other commentators cannot.

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