Society NOW

ESRC RESEARCH MAKING AN IMPACT
SUMMER 2008 ISSUE 1

A unique British institution
The NHS at 60

Evan Davis. The money, the market & the man
Getting higher qualifications to escape the poverty trap
What consumers really want from their food shopping choice
Welcome
to Society Now, the first issue of the Economic and Social Research Council’s (ESRC) new regular magazine. The following pages highlight ESRC’s research and the impact of social sciences, from improving prosperity to enhancing quality of life.

The magazine will give you a flavour of ESRC’s top quality research across a wide range of topics; some of the work described here illustrates very specific current issues and concerns. The cover feature takes a look at the NHS at 60 and the new challenges and expectations of 2008. Other pieces explore education, consumerism, global communications and a host of topical subjects, from John Dupre’s piece on the legacy of Darwin to Heather Joshi’s on gender equality.

I hope you find what follows interesting, informative and enjoyable – this will be the first of many issues and I very much welcome your feedback and ideas for content.

Editor, Jacky Clake

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BRITISH STREET GANGS are an issue of increasing concern, but new research suggests that policymakers need a broader understanding of this problem before effective interventions can be introduced. A two-year study based on more than 100 individual and group interviews with gang members, their associates and families, other key informants, youths not involved in gangs and their parents, and representatives of community groups and local agencies highlights critical issues that existing policy ignores.

“What is often missed is that young people in gangs and their families experience considerable trauma,” says lead researcher Dr Judith Aldridge. “We found reference to violence and exposure to violent events – as victims, perpetrators and witnesses – to be part of everyday conversation and growing up for many young people in these communities. Yet these communities are perceived by those on the outside as very robust and are left to cope with the trauma of this exposure to violence seemingly without help.”

Research from the United States suggests that exposure to community violence can have a lasting impact on young people, in the form of depression, increased aggression and other outcomes. Researchers point to the need for public health interventions that assess and treat the psychological impact on children and young adults of exposure to community violence.

Parents of gang members also see themselves as victims, believing they have tried all the strategies available in dealing with their children. “These parents want support, but are suspicious and fearful of statutory agencies, who they perceive to blame them and from whom they fear catastrophic repercussions, such as having their other children taken into care,” Dr Juanjo Medina-Ariza points out. “Those seeking to intervene need to be much more sensitive to how salient this feeling of blame is, to address up front parental fears regarding the possible risks of co-operating and to offer non-judgemental support to parents wanting to find better ways of dealing with their children.”

The study shows that despite considerable progress in this area, serious tensions and mistrust hampering effective practice still exist across agencies and particularly between agencies and community groups.

The study also provides an up-to-date picture of gang culture in Britain. Gangs are often ethnically mixed, and their ethnic composition tends to reflect the communities from which they have emerged. Yet people in communities and statutory community agencies often identify gangs as existing only in black ethnic minority areas. Moreover, gangs were not found to be primarily drug-dealing enterprises, as is often believed. Gang members themselves date their more serious involvement in gang culture to periods of school exclusion.

“We really don’t know enough about the nature of these groups,” Dr Rob Ralphs admits. “Nevertheless, policy and interventions are being developed and these will be impoverished without a good understanding of the phenomenon. The label ‘gang’ implies that there is one type of formation but in reality there are many different types of gang and, depending on the type – for example, a specialist drug network versus a loose association of young people – some policy interventions might be more appropriate than others.”
NHS ‘targets and terror’ regime pays off

THE LABOUR ADMINISTRATION policy of strict waiting time targets in the NHS combined with managerial sanctions has achieved some success, say researchers from the University of Bristol. Targets have been a key component in the drive to increase productivity and responsiveness in the NHS. Targets in the NHS are not new, but the Labour Government has increased the use of targets to the point where some commentators have dubbed the regime as one of ‘targets and terror’. In contrast, the Scottish Parliament, which assumed responsibility for the NHS in Scotland on devolution in 1999, has considerably reduced its reliance on targets, preferring to promote co-operation and collaboration.

Researchers have exploited this policy variation in the use of waiting time targets in Scotland and England to evaluate the usefulness of targets as a means of increasing NHS productivity. The study looked at the proportion of people who waited over six, nine and 12 months for treatment. The findings show that, whether published or unpublished data is used, the ‘targets and terror’ regime in England lowered the proportion of people waiting for elective treatment relative to Scotland.

Did the reduction in maximum waiting times in England lead to unintended adverse consequences? The findings suggest not. While there was a slight redistribution of waiting time, the increased wait for the ‘short-waiters’ was slight in comparison to the substantial reduction for the ‘long-waiters’. Researchers also found evidence that a higher risk of breaching targets increases the number of patients removed from the waiting list without treatment and the number of patients suspended from the waiting list. This suggests that the targets regime leads to a more active management of waiting lists.

The study also reveals that the risk of breaching targets is associated with a redistribution of activity from specialities not at risk to specialities most at risk of breaching targets. However, there is little evidence of changing prioritisation of patients. The order in which patients are seen from the waiting list depends on factors such as age or the presence of comorbidity. There is little evidence that this ordering changed over time in England and, where it did, similar changes were found in Scotland.

The researchers also looked for changes in the quality of care, using a wide range of clinical indicators. “Our analysis does not show consistent deteriorations in quality in those hospitals facing the greatest pressure in terms of the percentage of patients likely to breach the waiting time target,” Professor Windmeijer concludes.

This research is a project within the ESRC’s Public Services Programme.
Police reforms achieve only short-term gains

A LACK OF comprehensive, centralised data means that UK-wide information on key policing issues is missing. “In the absence of a centralised, robust management information system, we cannot provide research-informed answers to key questions such as how much time police spend on the beat as opposed to filling out paperwork and how much money is spent on training or recruitment practices,” says Andreas Cebulla from the National Centre for Social Research.

This is just one finding from an 18-month study of the impact of police reforms on public perceptions of the police. Researchers analysed data from the British Crime Survey pertaining to three key periods of police reforms in England and Wales; the introduction of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act of 1984; the introduction of New Public Management strategies to the police in the 1980s; and the publication of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry (Macpherson Report).

“The positive effect of these grand initiatives on public perception was largely short-term,” says Mr Cebulla. So, for example, though minority ethnic populations reported improved approval ratings for the police following the adoption of recommendations made in the Macpherson Report, these ratings have declined in recent years.

The study also shows that victims of crime are least likely to have a positive impression of the police. “We can speculate that victims take the view that the police are not doing a proper job as they couldn’t protect them from crime in the first place,” Mr Cebulla suggests.

Offering victims better communication and information regarding their case is one way to improve perceptions. “The effort displayed at the crime scene is key to gaining victims’ approval,” say researchers. Genuine interest, concern and a visible effort are highly valued by victims.

This research is a project within the ESRC’s Public Services Programme.

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ESRC Grant Number RES-166-25-0070

IN BRIEF

WHAT WELLNESS MEANS
This study will explore resilience and wellness in older people suffering from osteoarthritis, a long-term, painful condition. How do those affected use health services and does how they think about themselves and their condition change? The research will contribute to understanding how older people can maintain their health and independence and how they can access support and services without presenting themselves as ‘ill’.

ESRC Grant Number: RES-000-22-2812

MAD ABOUT MATHS
What are the key factors that lead students to become either engaged with or, conversely, disenchanted with post-16 mathematics and physics? Researchers will gather data from a large number of schools, conducting interviews and observations over a two-year period, as well as interviewing more than 50 first-year university students to discover what shapes patterns of participation in maths and physics.

ESRC Grant Number: RES-178-25-0013

A SURPLUS OF MEN
In China there are 120 male births for every 100 female births. By 2020 there will be 20 million more men than women of marriageable age, yet the consequences of this huge surplus of men is unknown. This study will explore the demographic, social and psychological consequences of high sex ratios in China. Researchers aim to inform policy about the management and prevention of high sex ratios.

ESRC Grant Number: RES-062-23-1097

GIVING THE POOR A VOICE
Poor people’s lack of voice and influence are globally recurring themes. This project will evaluate attempts in India to tackle this core element of poverty through local governance reform. The central research question is: to what extent do participatory initiatives within local governance enhance poor people’s opportunities for political empowerment? The project has been designed in collaboration with Indian partner institutions.

ESRC Grant Number: RES-167-25-0268
OUTSIDE BENEFITS
When people spend time outdoors, several benefits are likely to follow. Yet contemporary western societies now collectively spend over 90 per cent of their time indoors. Based on a study of professional office workers in London, this research will explore how easily personal wellbeing and environmental experiences can be combined within the actual lifestyles of different groups.
ESRC GRANT NUMBER: RES-000-22-2129

ETHNICITY AND CRIME
By analysing the impact of ethnicity on patterns of recorded crime and on decision-making at every point in the criminal justice system during the 18th and early 19th centuries, this project will provide a vital comparative perspective on a topical issue. Were these ethnic groups over-represented among those accused of crime and were they more likely to be found guilty and to receive harsher punishments?
ESRC GRANT NUMBER: RES-000-22-2896

MEASURING MEDICAL PERFORMANCE
The publication of clinical performance data aims to increase the accountability of the medical profession. Yet the impact of publication on clinical teams, organisations and the regulatory healthcare regime may be variable and contradictory. This study, conducted by the St George’s Hospital Trust, will investigate the impacts of the publication of performance data relating to cardiac surgery on all stakeholders.
ESRC GRANT NUMBER: RES-153-25-0100

DISABLED BY POVERTY
Previous research has documented a strong link between poverty and child disability. Little, however, is known about the mechanisms underlying this association. This study will track the fortunes of some 7,000 British families over a six-year period to determine the extent to which families raising a disabled child are at greater or lesser risk, compared to other British families, of entering into and escaping from spells of poverty.
ESRC GRANT NUMBER: RES-000-22-2874

Ageing in the media
OLD AGE IS portrayed in media advertisements in a variety of positive and negative ways but with some evidence of less traditional stereotyping, according to new research.
A study of TV advertisements featuring people aged 65 and above finds that almost half of the adverts were positive portrayals of older people, over a third had a neutral tone and only about one fifth were negative. In contrast with the findings of previous research, the older characters were more often central to the advert, rather than secondary or peripheral figures. They appeared in a home setting most often and appeared as lively, active and enjoying life.
One specific campaign advertising Bertolli Olivio margarine has used older people in a Mediterranean setting as central characters for a number of years. Four distinct stages of the campaign were identified in which the older characters appear more and more as individuals – as opposed to, for example, benevolent grandparent figures – and also as stereotype-defying and sexual beings. “These adverts might exemplify a growing trend to offer more heterogeneous depictions of old age and ageing in the media,” researcher Dr Angie Williams suggests.

Dietary changes
IN COMMON WITH many developed countries, the UK is facing a significant obesity problem. New research led by Dr Ian Crawford offers key insights into consumers’ dietary and nutritional preferences and how these preferences have changed over the last 20 years. Researchers used data on the prices paid for different foods and the compositions of those foods for over 20,000 UK households between 1980 and 2000.
The study reveals a large change in preferences for different fats over the period towards ‘healthier’ types, though for other food groups, such as sodium, preferences have changed little. In general, food preferences have narrowed and become much more homogenous since 1980. Researchers also identified a clear tendency for more affluent households to favour relatively healthy options such as vegetable protein, polyunsaturated fatty acids and dietary fibre.
HOW DOES THE way the media is organised affect what is reported and what viewers know?

To tackle this question, researchers looked in depth at the television systems in four countries: the market-based system in the United States; the unreconstructed public service systems in Finland and Denmark; and the intermediate system between these models that operates in Britain.

The study shows that the United States system is preoccupied with domestic news – American networks allocate only 20 per cent of programming time to foreign news. “By contrast, as a proportion of news programming time, foreign coverage on the main news channels in Britain and Finland is nearly 50 per cent more than that in the United States,” says Professor James Curran.

Ratings-conscious American networks also allocate significant time to ‘soft’ news, both foreign and domestic, as does British television news. This compares with much lower proportions in Finland and Denmark – the Anglo-American daily television quota of soft news is more than double that in Finland. “In short, Finnish and Danish public service television is more hard news orientated and outward looking than American commercial television, with British television occupying an orbit closer to the American model,” Professor Curran states.

The findings further show that Americans are especially uninformed about international public affairs. For example, 62 per cent of Americans were unable to identify the Kyoto Accords as a treaty on climate change (compared to 20 per cent in Finland and Denmark and 39 per cent in Britain). Overall, the Scandinavians emerged as the best informed, averaging 62-67 per cent correct responses, the British were relatively close behind with 59 per cent, and the Americans brought up the rear with 40 per cent. American respondents also underperformed in relation to domestic-related hard news stories.

“As a determinant of knowledge about public life, how the media is organised is less important than the widespread cultural processes in a society that stimulate interest in public affairs,” argues Professor Curran. “But this does not mean that the architecture of media systems is unimportant. Our evidence suggests that the public service model gives greater attention to public affairs and international news, and so fosters greater knowledge in these areas. The public service model makes television news more accessible on leading channels and fosters higher levels of TV news consumption. It also tends to minimize the knowledge gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged and so contributes to a more egalitarian pattern of citizenship.”

Perhaps the most significant result to emerge is the low level of attention that the television system of the United States gives to the world outside America and, to a lesser extent, to ‘hard’ news. A growing number of countries are converging towards the entertainment-centred model of television. This trend seems to foster an impoverished public life characterised by declining exposure to serious journalism and reduced levels of public knowledge.
Radical re-think required on drinking policies

SOME ANTI-DRINKING campaigns may be ‘catastrophically misconceived’ because they play on the drinking stories that young people use to mark their social identity, according to a new study. Government measures to curb the sale of cheap spirits and a concerted effort by the alcohol industry to desist from aggressive marketing of spirits to under-25s could pay better dividends.

Adverts that show young people being thrown out of a nightclub, being carried home or passing out in a doorway are often seen as a story of a ‘fun’ night out, rather than as a cautionary tale. While these adverts imply a penalty of social disapproval, the opposite is often true.

“Extreme inebriation is often seen as a source of personal esteem and social affirmation among young people,” explains Professor Christine Griffin. “Not only does being in a group legitimise being drunk, being the subject of an extreme drinking story can raise esteem. Anti-drinking campaigns that target this kind of behaviour may be catastrophically misconceived.”

The project has implications for government policy on young people’s alcohol consumption, health education initiatives and industry messages about responsible drinking. “The study suggests that a policy is required that takes into account the social character of alcohol consumption and the identity implications for young people,” Professor Griffin argues. While young people recognise the damage that drinking can do to their health, and the associated risks of physical and sexual assault, few view these as more than short-term problems.

Campaigns that emphasise ‘safe’ levels of drinking are unlikely to have any substantial purchase on young people’s drinking practices. The onus remains on young drinkers to change their drinking practices. “Government policies need to tackle issues of price, availability and the marketing and sale of increasingly strong drinks to young people, while recognising the important role drinking plays in young people’s social lives and the formation of their social group identities,” Professor Griffin concludes.

One priority is to target cheap deals on shots of spirits – an issue that has changed markedly over the past decade. The study also suggests that careful attention be paid to attractive deals such as miniature bottles of spirits. Making these offers available to students in campus shops, for example, is possibly one source of temptation too far.

This research is a project within the ESRC’s Identities and Social Action Programme.

How to talk about terrorist threats

DIFFERENCES IN HOW we think about and make sense of the threat of terrorism have a clear impact on how we respond to official communications concerning terrorist risk, research suggests. This finding has implications for how authorities decide to communicate terrorist threats to the public.

The study used focus groups with people who differed in social class, location, gender and religion, and interviews with communication experts from the security services, government departments, parliament and the media, to offer insight into how to increase the effectiveness and sensitivity of communications to the public about terrorist risk.

The findings show that people feel disempowered in relation to terrorism and that few see themselves as being able to make a contribution. Important differences between sub-groups exist. For example, non-Muslim women expressed more control, whereas Muslim women expressed more helplessness. Communications therefore need to be targeted at increasing a sense of control where appropriate – for example, increasing the public’s belief that vigilance will have useful consequences.

These findings indicate that official communications need to be tailored to a detailed understanding of the casual beliefs of the group to which they are directed. The public needs encouragement to discuss the terrorist threat as something that seriously affects them personally, and as something they can influence. Muslims must be helped to define themselves as an essential part of the mainstream societal response to minimise the actual threat from terrorism. Experts need to be informed about how the public conceptualises and feels about the terrorist threat so that their communications resonate with existing public concerns.

Says Professor John Maule: “Adjusting the style and content of messages to take account of differences in the audience is clearly key to the development of more effective and sensitive communications concerning terrorist risk.”

This research is a project within the ESRC’s New Security Challenges Programme.
Second-hand gains

DESpite being largely overlooked as a component of the international trading environment, the second-hand clothing trade is having a positive impact on poverty alleviation in Kenya. Dr Simone Field explored the operation of the second-hand clothing trade from the UK to Kenya and evaluated the distribution of gains along the chain, from UK charities and the textile reclamation industry, to importers, retailers and consumers in Kenya.

“The trade soaks up labour and offers consumers low-cost clothing,” says Dr Field. “It provides a relatively lucrative activity for retailers, as well as supporting the livelihoods of people working in distribution, repair, restyling and so on. It also has clear benefits in providing affordable clothing to the population.”

Exports of second-hand clothing from rich to poor countries have increased substantially over the last two decades, especially to sub-Saharan Africa. The study shows that UK charities are the primary collection agents. Clothing not bought in their shops is sold on to the 80 companies that comprise the UK reclamation industry. At their processing factories, the clothing is separated by grade, compressed into 45kg bales and exported. In Kenya, some 60-80 importers sell the bales to the 100-150 retailers in Nairobi’s Gikomba Market, the largest second-hand clothing market in Kenya. Low-quality garments are sold on until they reach rural markets, where they are bought at very low prices.

Yet this industry is facing a crisis. Low-quality imports to the UK from China and India are increasing. These garments are not suitable for re-use, so the quantity and value of garments available for export has declined. The high value of sterling against export competitors’ currencies is compounding the problem, as are high tariff duties.

“Our fieldwork in Kenya shows that quality is the principal factor in determining gains among importers, wholesalers and retailers,” says Dr Field. “Importers have raised prices and wholesalers have passed these costs on to retailers. However, retailers at Gikomba Market have been unable to raise prices and so their profit margins are declining.”

These findings have been used by the UK Textile Reclamation Association and the EU Bureau of International Recycling to lobby the UK Government and the EU Commission to support the future of the recycling industry.

IN BRIEF

NOISE EFFECTS ON LEARNING

Researchers from Queen Mary, University of London will conduct a six-year follow-up study of the UK Road Traffic and Aircraft Noise Exposure and Children’s Cognition and Health project (RANCH). This is the first study to examine the longitudinal effects of noise exposure on children’s cognition and will examine whether children who attend primary schools exposed to aircraft noise experience impaired reading comprehension during secondary school.

ESRC GRANT NUMBER: RES-062-23-1165

REFORM THROUGH EDUCATION

Can the transformation of higher education in South Africa meet the challenges of poverty reduction, economic development and social transformation in the 21st century? Based on studies of four South African universities in the Western Cape, researchers will investigate the role of universities as ‘engines of reform’. A key objective will be to contribute to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

ESRC GRANT NUMBER: RES-167-25-0302

MORE THAN JUST A JOKE

Explicit prejudice and discrimination is arguably less prevalent in today’s society. One form of prejudice that is still acceptable is stereotype-based humour – for example, jokes about women being unintelligent. This study will investigate the effects that such stereotype-based humour about women can have on women’s subsequent perceptions and behaviour. Does it make women more likely to perform better or worse on a measure of intelligence?

ESRC GRANT NUMBER: RES-000-22-2848

For further information, please search for the ESRC grant number at http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk

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ESRC Grant Number RES-000-22-0617

Second-hand gains

Cheap imports to the UK are adversely affecting the second-hand clothing export market
PERCEIVING BEAUTY

Research into attractiveness judgements shows that our perception of beauty is neither simple nor arbitrary, suggests Dr Ben Jones

Beauty contests may have lost their allure 100 years after the first international contest in Folkestone, but the scientific study of beauty has never been as widespread as over the last decade. This sudden growth is well justified: although the notion will be anathema to many, a wealth of empirical evidence demonstrates that we not only prefer physically attractive romantic partners and friends, but we even prefer to employ and vote for ‘beautiful’ people.

The effects of attractiveness on critical social outcomes are not restricted to interactions among adults: research shows that mothers bond more strongly with physically attractive infants and that hospital workers and teachers invest more time and effort in ‘cute’ children. Given the key role that physical attractiveness appears to play in such important social outcomes, it is perhaps unsurprising that areas as diverse as psychology, neuroscience, computer science and biology have sought to identify the physical characteristics and psychological processes that underpin attractiveness judgements.

Much as beauty contest judges seek to reach a consensus about which contestant is the most attractive, early research on physical attractiveness sought to identify the physical characteristics that most people agree are highly attractive. Such research has shown that symmetric features and clear, unblemished skin are not only perceived as attractive, but are also perceived as attractive by people from very different cultures and of very different ages. These ‘universal’ preferences indicate that attraction may have a biological basis. Indeed, from an evolutionary perspective, individuals with symmetric features and healthy-looking skin will make excellent mates because they are likely to be both particularly healthy and well-placed to pass on this good health to their offspring. Also consistent with this evolutionary view of attraction is that attractive individuals are more likely to have genetic profiles that make them less vulnerable to disease.

While it is often said that beauty is in the eye of the beholder – implying that attraction is simply a matter of personal preference – research demonstrates remarkably high agreement among individuals in what they consider attractive. More surprisingly, recent research also shows that differences of opinion about what is attractive or unattractive can occur in predictable ways. For example, women’s aversions to cues of illness, such as pallor, are substantially stronger when their progesterone levels are raised. In this phase women also show stronger preferences for individuals with faces that are similar to their own. Since raised progesterone is a characteristic of pregnancy, these effects may help to protect both mums-to-be and unborn babies from illness and increase the amount of care and support that is available from members of the extended family.

Other studies of individual differences in attractiveness judgements have found that attractive women show particularly strong preferences for masculine men, while attractive men show particularly strong preferences for feminine women. These effects of own attractiveness are thought to occur because only the most attractive individuals will be able to successfully compete for the most masculine or feminine mates and are strikingly similar to individual differences in mate preferences that have been widely reported in a number of different species.

Symmetric features and clear, unblemished skin are perceived as attractive by people from very different cultures and of very different ages.

Recent advances in brain-imaging techniques have provided the tools to investigate the brain mechanisms that underpin attractiveness judgements. Viewing photographs of attractive people increases activity in brain regions that are known to be important for processing financial, food and sexual rewards. Moreover, the extent to which we find viewing attractive individuals rewarding is profoundly affected by the extent to which these people appear to be attracted to the viewer. For example, eye contact or smiling increases how rewarding we find looking at attractive individuals, but decreases how rewarding we find looking at unattractive people. These effects show that attraction is far more complex than simple responses to physical beauty and that it is influenced by whether the viewed individual appears to engage with the viewer.

Far from being the shallow pursuit of bawdy titillation that characterised early beauty contests, the scientific study of attractiveness provides insight into one of the driving forces of social interaction.

Dr Ben Jones is a lecturer in the School of Psychology, University of Aberdeen. His research is funded by the National Science Foundation (USA), Nuffield Foundation, ESRC and NSERC (Canada).

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SUMMER 2008 SOCIETY NOW 11
EIGHTY YEARS OF equal political citizenship for men and women in the UK since the Equal Franchise Act of 1928 have seen a lifetime of spectacular, and on-going, change in the division of labour and of power between the sexes.

Broadly speaking, in the inter-war years, nurturing the young, the old, the infirm and indeed the able-bodied, was women’s work. Some of it was paid, in professions such as teaching and nursing, but mainly it was ‘vital but unpaid’, as William Beveridge put it.

The women who gained the vote in 1928 at ages over 21 (following those aged over 30 in 1918) encountered far fewer opportunities in the world beyond the home than the generations who were born after 1907. Girls have become as likely as boys to receive secondary education and, eventually, to overtake them in entering higher education. Marriage has ceased to be a bar to women’s employment, or a prerequisite for living together or having children. Divorce has become easier, as has legal redress against domestic violence. Fertility control and childbirth have become safer. Child health has improved and housework has become less onerous. There is opportunity for women to have paid careers in an increasing number of occupations.

Technology has transformed the tasks needed in paid and domestic work. The boundaries between them have shifted and the lines of gender demarcation have blurred. Women now work in formerly male fields – from clergy to bus driving, for example. The expectation that motherhood and employment should be incompatible has been overtaken by the experience that they are increasingly combined. Despite provisos about the limits to some of these changes – few women in top jobs, few men in ‘caring jobs’, and the sacrifices needed to combine paid and caring roles – there is no denying the massive change across and within lifetimes.

Parliament remained a male bastion for rather longer than many other institutions. Only a handful of women held parliamentary seats for the half century following universal franchise. Eleanor Rathbone MP can be credited with establishing Family Allowances, but the substantial raft of educational and welfare legislation in the 1940s did not need to wait for the feminisation of the parliament to usher in change. The feminisation of the electorate seems to have sufficed.

In the 1970s, the objective of sex equality was made explicit in the legislation brought in by Barbara Castle – on Equal Pay, Sex Discrimination and Employment Protection – which attempted to redress the unequal treatment of women in the labour market and brought in statutory maternity rights. Barbara Castle also introduced reform of the pension system, which, among other things, phased out the principle enshrined in the Beveridge scheme that a wife would normally be provided for by her husband.

In the 1980s, the United Kingdom’s first female prime minister did not introduce much legislation that was directly aimed at gender equality. However, Margaret Thatcher’s campaign of labour market deregulation emasculated many unions, opening them up to influence from their growing number of women members. This in turn strengthened demands for family-friendly employment rights and practices.

The 1990s saw increasing recognition that sex equality in employment was not attainable without complementary support for nurturing activities. Elder care, child care, and early education became part of the New Labour agenda. Perhaps of equal significance, employment legislation began to recognize fathers’ rights to time off for parental duties.

The separation of spheres and the subordination of women may never have been complete, but neither have they disappeared. Whether the trends are leading to a situation where gender differences become irrelevant is not clear. Yet it is clear that many unacceptable gender differences remain.

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The poverty among today’s elderly women still bears witness to the inadequacy of the earnings and pensions over the lifetime of their generation. The poverty of lone mothers is still a major source of disadvantage for the next generation. Legislators and electorate need to add to the ‘Equalities agenda’ the issue of how society rewards nurturing activity, whether caring be done by men or women, paid or unpaid. A life’s span is a short time in gender politics.

Professor Heather Joshi is Director of the ESRC Centre for Longitudinal Studies, Institute of Education, University of London, and a co-investigator in the ESRC Gender Network.

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In July 1948, health secretary Aneurin ‘Nye’ Bevan launched the National Health Service at Park Hospital, Manchester to begin the provision of free and comprehensive health care for the British public. Sixty years later the different world and expectations of 2008 are posing new challenges for the NHS, as outlined here by our panel of experts.

**The NHS: a unique British institution**

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**CELEBRATING THE NHS**

Dr Peter Carter OBE, Chief Executive and General Secretary, Royal College of Nursing

**WHEN THE NHS opened its doors on 5 July 1948 it did so in a very different healthcare environment to that of today. Back then millions were denied care because they had no health insurance; hospitals and GPs charged for their services; and those who could not afford to pay had to rely on the kindness of charity, or go without care altogether.**

Before the NHS came into being tens of thousands died every year from preventable diseases such as polio. In the year preceding its foundation average life expectancy was just 69 for women and only 63 for men; and a staggering one in 20 children died before their first birthday.

The pre-NHS era was one where the good intentions of healthcare professionals were undermined by the great injustices of a free market in healthcare where, shamefully, the level of your annual income determined the level of your access to treatment.

But the NHS changed all of this with the introduction of a publicly owned, publicly funded, publicly accountable health service. A health service that was universal, comprehensive and free to all. A health service dedicated to making a difference, rather than making a profit. A health service designed to ensure freedom from fear for every man, woman and child in the country, regardless of gender, race, religion, sexuality, class or income.

This year we celebrate 60 years of the NHS. Sixty years in which it has improved the health of our nation, transformed the lives of millions and been as much a means of spreading social justice as it has been a vehicle for delivering quality healthcare. Quite simply, if it did not exist, it would have to be invented.

Noble in conception, effective in practice, this unique institution is the jewel in the crown of our country’s public services. In the decades since its creation it has modernised and evolved. In the years ahead it will undoubtedly continue this process of change and advancement. But, as it makes this journey of progress, it should do what it has always done: namely work with the grain of its founding principles and guiding values.

So, in this the 60th anniversary year of the NHS, we should take pride in its past and celebrate its achievements. But, in the policies we develop and the reforms we introduce, our priority must always be to secure its future.
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A HEALTH SERVICE LOST
Claire Rayner OBE, President of the Patients Association

I wish this year really was the 60th birthday of the NHS. I was in at the birth of this wonderful idea of the post-war government, and I saw how joyously patients reacted with delight to a future in which they would no longer be crippled by bills from doctors or hospitals.

But there isn’t an NHS now. What we have is an LHS, a Local Health Service – a collection of accountants, GPs and retired bankers who understand money. It is money that comes first, not the patients who were promised by government that they would.

And the money issue is already tainted, because local control means that the inequalities set in place by the reform before last (or was it the one before – who can remember?) and which came to be called Post Code Care (sic) are now set in concrete. What one primary care trust will pay for, another will refuse.

So my view of the future is glum. Will the government see their errors in time to correct them? Who knows? All we can do is wait and hope – because it would be wonderful to see patients once again looking as happy as they did in 1948.

THE CHANGING HEALTH SERVICE
Dr Ian Greener, Reader in the School of Applied Social Sciences, Durham University, and a researcher within the ESRC’s Culture of Consumption Programme

How has the NHS changed over the last 60 years? There have been a number of dramatic improvements in technology so that, from the situation that existed upon the NHS’s founding, where GPs had in practice very few treatments that could offer much relief from commonplace illnesses, they can now prescribe a bewildering range of drugs.

There have been rapid growths in medical specialisms and innovations, such as day-surgery, that have elevated skills to levels that would have been jaw-dropping to hospital doctors of the 1940s. The overwhelming majority of NHS staff do a remarkable job when the consequences of their having a single bad day could be considerable for their patients.

However, all is not entirely well with the National Health Service. Medicine has lost some of its lustre as improvements in drug treatment and surgery seem to now be marginal, rather than the dramatic changes that were seen in the 1950s and 1960s. Hospitals remain hugely powerful and continue to absorb a disproportionate amount of resources. Antibiotics have gone from being wonder drugs perceived as an easy cure-all for every type of illness to being over-used and in danger of losing their efficacy. Pharmaceutical companies sometimes seem to be trying to sell new treatments even where their benefits over existing treatments no longer seem great – even if their cost often is.

Patients have changed too. We are no longer grateful for the NHS, having forgotten what it was to worry about the cost of seeing a doctor before making an appointment. We now complain about having to wait, and demand personal and attentive services from health professionals. We are encouraged by the government to consider ourselves as health consumers rather than patients, and to try and drive reform through our choices of GP and hospital.

The worst-case outcome for the NHS is a combination of medicine no longer being regarded as miraculous, of politicians driving up public expectations of health services to unreasonable levels, and the public deciding that they would rather go to a herbal therapist or reiki healer rather than their GP.

The National Health Service is not perfect, but we must find ways of improving it through critical appreciation, rather than through derogation; we must find ways of breaking through media-led disaffection, and of celebrating the achievements of the Health Service, not only on its 60th anniversary, but every day.
**THE NHS FEATURE**

**CREATING AN NHS CONSENSUS**

Dr Hamish Meldrum, Chairman of Council, British Medical Association

Sixty years on, the founding principles of the NHS are as relevant as ever, and the relationship between doctors and patients never more important. However, we face new challenges putting these principles into practice and safeguarding the standard of care that patients expect and deserve.

In the United Kingdom, responding to these challenges has resulted in recent significant increases in funding for the NHS. At the same time there have been changes, many highly debatable, to the system of healthcare delivery in England and we are seeing an increasingly devolved NHS in the four UK countries.

At this time of celebration of the past, we must remain cautious about the future. The many challenges facing the NHS have not been surmounted. Despite a huge amount of reform, much of it testing and often controversial, the anticipated benefits of change have not yet been achieved. The BMA has played its part in shaping thinking and employing the insight of doctors to offer solutions that might further improve the care that NHS patients receive.

In 2007 the BMA undertook a nine-month review of the pressures facing the NHS in England. The resulting recommendations demonstrated the desire of the medical profession to play a leading part in recasting reform and reflected our enduring commitment to the NHS. We have published a series of papers which we hope will greatly influence the nature of future thinking and the resulting policy that will guide the NHS over the next 60 years.

This commitment to the NHS and its founding principles is perhaps most profoundly expressed in our proposal for an NHS constitution. It is our belief that a formal constitution for the NHS would provide a reinforced foundation upon which the NHS can seek to continue to improve the health of the population, honouring a set of shared values and principles to which all those that are invested in the NHS can subscribe.

A constitution presents an opportunity to articulate a shared consensus concerning the nature and purpose of the NHS. It is crucial that the public’s sense of ownership of the NHS is firmly secured. A constitution would offer patients clarity about what they can expect from their health service and what, in turn, their responsibilities might be. It would maintain public confidence in the NHS and safeguard its future.

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**60 years of the NHS**

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TACKLING HEALTH INEQUALITIES

Professor Tim Blackman, Director, Wolfson Research Institute, Durham University, and a researcher within the ESRC’s Public Service Programme

The UK no longer has one National Health Service but four, under the separate jurisdictions of four national governments. This makes it difficult to generalise about ‘the NHS’, since there are marked differences in structures and, to a lesser degree, priorities. Nevertheless, the principle of a universally accessible and largely tax-funded range of health services planned and delivered according to need is shared across the UK.

The role of the NHS in all four countries is still predominantly that of a ‘sickness service’. Under recent Labour governments there have been unprecedented increases in funding that have seen waiting times tumble and better treatments save more lives. The health of the general population has continued to improve.

There are, however, paradoxes. The increases in funding have not been reflected in improvements in care and outcomes on the same scale. Health on average has improved but health inequality has worsened. We are healthier but not happier.

There are new health risks that threaten to reverse the progress made with tackling smoking and treating circulatory diseases and cancers. Obesity is one example, though the underlying problem is not weight but growing levels of unfitness. Dangerous levels of alcohol consumption is another example, occurring at both ends of the income spectrum. Many of us remain vulnerable to mental ill-health.

The NHS has been successful as a sickness service and, increasingly, in preventing sickness by treating risk factors. General improvements in the standard of living and to housing, the environment, incomes, pensions and children’s services have contributed to growing life expectancy. But marked inequalities persist: life expectancy for males in the healthiest local authority area in England is over 83 years but in the least healthy area in Scotland it is barely more than 70. Striking inequalities are evident at a small area level: in Bolton, life expectancy varies from over 82 in the most affluent area to less than 68 in the most deprived.

The NHS can impact on these inequalities by targeting early diagnosis and treatment where it is most needed. Public health workers are advocating going ‘industrial scale’ with prescribing statins and antihypertensive drugs and expanding smoking cessation services to tackle health inequalities. We also need, though, to go industrial scale with tackling their underlying economic determinants.

1988
The national breast-screening programme is introduced.

1990
The NHS and Community Care Act: the introduction of an internal market, where health authorities manage their own budgets, buying healthcare from hospitals and other providers.

1991
The first 57 NHS trusts are established, providing health services in the community.

1994
The NHS Organ Donor Register is established. By 2005 more than 12 million had registered.

1998
NHS Direct is launched, a nurse-led, 24-hour advice service over the phone.

2000
NHS walk-in centres are introduced, for the treatment of minor injuries and illnesses without appointment.

2002
Primary Care Trusts are set up to improve the administration and delivery of healthcare at a local level, liaising with the private sector when contracting out services.

2004
Patient Choice pilots: everyone referred to hospital treatment is given the choice of at least four hospitals.

2008
The NHS is one of the largest employers in the world with 1.5 million people. In 2007/08 it had a budget of £90 billion.
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Here we present an at-a-glance overview of the key issues in Britain today. In this issue our focus is on the national education system.

“I have never let my schooling interfere with my education” — Mark Twain

Money matters

86% increase since 1997 in the average fee for a border at a private school. The current average fee is £20,970. Source: Halifax Financial Services.

£37.5 billion Estimated total government expenditure on schools — up 39% in real terms from £27 billion in 2001/02.

£20,133 The salary for a newly qualified teacher outside London. Source: TDA.

“Teachers open the door, but you must enter by yourself” — Chinese proverb

Gender

65.5% of girls in England achieved five or more GCSE or equivalent A* to C grades, compared to...

56.4% of boys

Applicants accepted for higher education, by sex

Accepted applicants, expressed as percentages. Source: UCAS.

Pupils achieving five or more GCSE grades A* to C, or equivalent, by sex

Percentage

Source: The Department for Children, Schools and Families and data from the last school year unless otherwise stated.
“The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles, but to irrigate deserts” C. S. Lewis

GCSE/NQ Standard Grade

19.5% of GCSE/NQ entries gained grades of A* or A – up 0.4 per cent from the previous year

63.3% gained A* to C, up 0.9 per cent from the previous year

60.8% of 15-year-old pupils achieved 5 or more GCSEs or equivalent at grades A* to C in England – up 2.3 per cent from the previous year

1,296,700 entries for the most frequently studied subject at GCSE/NQ Standard Grade – English (language and literature). Mathematics: 740,300, Science Double Award: 493,000, Design & Technology: 386,000

Mathematics and science at A-level

The number of entries to A-level examinations in sciences and mathematics. Source: AQA

Figures

9,812,600 children in private education in Britain. Source: Independent Schools Council

509,093 enrolments at UK higher education institutes

33,892 The number of maintained and independent schools in the UK

519,800 full-time qualified teachers, of whom 69 per cent are female.
THE SUBJECT OF supermarket competition is seldom out of the news. The issue hit the headlines again earlier this year in the wake of the recent Competition Commission investigation, the third of its kind this decade.

The report’s main conclusion, that competition in the UK supermarket sector works well for consumers, led to claims that the investigation had been a waste of money.

Supermarkets said it had revealed little that was new, while smaller shop groups accused the Commission of failing to protect them from the dominance of their larger rivals.

Research led by Professor Ian Clarke of the University of Lancaster provides a new way of looking at the issue, by examining what choice means when looked at through a consumer lens.

The report, Retail Competition and Consumer Choice: Long-Term Change and Household Dynamics, called into question the ways in which retailers, regulators and planners tended to view consumer choice.

Professor Clarke and fellow professors Peter Jackson of the University of Sheffield and Alan Hallsworth of the University of Surrey examined the ways in which shopping had changed between 1980 and 2002 in Portsmouth, an ‘average’ city in terms of the provision of shops and the profile of the local population.

The researchers combined extensive surveys with in-depth qualitative studies of households’ local shopping habits. It was the first time that a study of this kind had covered such a long time period.

Retailers welcomed this approach. Boots, the high street chemist chain, said it met demands from policymakers and retailers for an in-depth consideration of the implications of retail change over a long time period, with Martin Pope, then its Head of Town Planning, saying: “Existing research has tended towards a ‘snapshot’ approach, which fails to unearth the dynamic effects of cumulative retail development over time.”

The research found that consumer behaviour failed to fit into the controversial two-market definition – one-stop and convenience – that the Competition Commission had put in place.

Professor Clarke said: “We found that people were using large and small shops interchangeably. They might use a small store to do top-up shopping one minute, and the next minute they are using it to do their main shop. In terms of top-up there was no difference between the two.”

This was a highly significant finding as the market share of companies such as Tesco, which has been active in buying convenience stores, would be much higher if the one-stop and convenience were added together.

Leading retail experts praised the research. Bill

CONSUMER FOOD CHOICE

Recent ESRC-funded research has influenced the ways in which regulators and retailers look at the thorny issues of choice and competition in the UK’s food retail sector. Phil Thornton reports on recent developments in the search to find out what consumers really want from their food shopping experience.

Consumers don’t really mind if their local shop is large or small, nor do they mind who owns it – just as long as they have a choice.
Grimsey, Chief Executive of The Big Food Group, said it put a ‘coach and horses’ through the two-market rule.

“The two-market definition needs to be reviewed urgently as large supermarket operators are making acquisitions in the convenience sector without investigation by the competition authorities,” he said.

“This will reduce consumer choice in the future because the supermarkets’ buying power undermines the economics and infrastructure necessary to maintain a vital and viable independent small store sector.”

John Bridgeman, former Director General of the Office of Fair Trading, commented: “Acquisitions should be subjected to wider scrutiny in the light of this new research, which puts consumers’ shopping habits and needs back on the policy agenda.”

In 2007 Professor Clarke of the ESRC’s Advanced Institute of Management with fellow academics Malcolm Kirkup of the University of Birmingham and Professor Harmen Oppewal of Monash University, Australia built on this qualitative research with a second quantitative study that proved useful to the Competition Commission’s latest inquiry.

Their report: Are Consumers Getting What They Really Want? sought to find out what ‘assortment’ or mix of stores led to the greatest customer satisfaction, under different local conditions of demography, affluence, accessibility to stores, and patterns of provision.

They chose three towns, one where the concentration of large stores was high (Milton Keynes), one where it was medium (Worcester), and one where it was low (Telford), and surveyed several thousand households over a range of neighbourhood types across the three locations.

They found that of all retailers, Tesco had the greatest contribution to local satisfaction with store assortment overall, but that consumer satisfaction was highest when consumers could choose from a variety of stores and retail ‘brands’. Consumers attached significant value to having a small, local store within five minutes from home, but were largely indifferent about who owned it. Consumer satisfaction does not depend simply on proximity to a particular supermarket or brand of retailer, but on a local combination of these factors, as well as on levels of mobility, age of respondents and level of affluence.

“Our research reaffirms the importance of having a local focus when we are examining and investigating local competition and choice issues,” said Professor Clarke.

The Competition Commission requested that the report be submitted as evidence to their inquiry, and cited the findings in its final report. Since then, the findings of the project have also been submitted to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, who are currently conducting a similar inquiry.

Professor Clarke believes that this was a sign that research was having a significant influence on policymakers. “It’s about getting the research into the hands of regulators and politicians, rather than just academics,” he said.

Now the message will go even further, thanks to an innovative method of dissemination, with a short video (see http://www.lums.lancs.ac.uk/news/retail-choice) describing the research and including comments from shoppers.

“The aim of the video summary is to convey the essence of our research to the widest possible audience,” Professor Clarke explained.

Phil Thornton, lead consultant at research house Clarity Economics
Previous research has suggested that offering an Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) encourages many people to stay on in education, but does it have any effect on the qualifications they gain?

New research suggests that it does, especially for particular groups such as black females and those from the most socially disadvantaged areas. However, the research, which will play a key role in shaping government policy on EMAs, also highlights areas where more work needs to be done, particularly with white boys from lower socio-economic groups.

EMAs were introduced nationally in 2004. They are payments of up to £30 a week, depending on family income, which are given to encourage young people from low-income families to stay on in education between the ages of 16 and 18. The money is paid directly to students who study at school or a further education college for at least 12 hours a week. The scheme is run by the Learning and Skills Council and increases government funding for the education of 16- to 19-year-olds by ten per cent.

The new study, by Haroon Chowdry, Lorraine Dearden and Carl Emmerson of the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) is the first to look at the effect of EMAs on attainment levels and break down data on participation and attainment by subgroups of gender, socio-economic group and ethnicity. It tracked students in pilot EMA areas between 2002 and 2004 and concluded that average A-level results could improve by at least 4.5 percentage points as a result of the introduction of EMAs.

Ian Pursglove, the Young People’s Support Programmes Policy Director of the Learning

Pay as you study

How can the poorest young people be encouraged to stay on in education, get higher qualifications and escape the poverty trap?

Mandy Garner reports on research concerning the Education Maintenance Allowance scheme
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Ian Pursglove, the Young People’s Support Programmes Policy Director of the Learning...
and Skills Council, commented: “The results from the report show that the EMA is making a real difference to the lives of some of the most disadvantaged young people.”

The new report builds on previous research, which has concentrated on participation rates for young people who are eligible for EMAs. A study by the IFS, which was charged with evaluating the scheme, found that the EMA increased participation in education by 5.9 percentage points of all 16-year-olds who were eligible to receive it. The study also found that students receiving EMAs were less likely to drop out, but the sample group was too small for the results to be broken down into subgroups.

The new research looks both at participation at ages 16 and 17 and attainment rates at ages 18 and 19, and compares students targeted for EMAs with those in other areas. It found significant increases in participation rates across groups, especially among black girls. For Asians there was less impact, though this is possibly due to the fact that many Asian pupils already stay on in education after they reach 16.

For those who did stay on in education as a result of receiving EMAs, attainment rose across all groups, but particularly for black girls and for those from lower socio-economic groups. Black girls were over five per cent more likely to get five GCSEs at grades A* to C, and 6.2 per cent more likely to get two A-levels or an NVQ Level 3. Their A-level results rose by around 20 percentage points.

However, although attainment tended to increase most for those from lower socio-economic groups, the research found that it tapered off at higher levels, such as A-level. Carl Emmerson, Deputy Director of the IFS, explains: “It’s a bit like the high jump: even if you make someone a better jumper, they still won’t be able to jump a 1.5 metre bar. The hurdles are unfairly great.” There is also a need to address attainment levels among white boys from the lowest socio-economic groups, who were least likely to show improvements in attainment. One way of tackling this is through earlier intervention to ensure that children had a good level of education before they reached 16.

The research backs up the findings of previous studies concerning the educational attainment of working-class white boys. Government figures released in January showed that only 15 per cent of working-class white boys got five good GCSE passes, compared to more than 45 per cent of white boys from more affluent homes. Experts say that the main factors holding working-class children back are parental aspirations, the children’s own aspirations and a lack of self-confidence.

In November of last year, the Government announced reforms to the EMA aimed at reaching the most disengaged young people, including a trial extension of the number of courses that the EMA applies to. From 30 June of this year it is also offering a flat rate of £30 a week for all new students taking Entry to Employment courses. These courses offer basic skills, vocational development and personal and social development.

The evidence of the EMAs’ effect on attainment is likely to influence the way in which financial support for students is restructured when the Government extends compulsory education to the age of 18 in 2015. According to Emmerson, the EMA represents the ‘carrot’ approach to encouraging students to stay on in education, while the plan to extend compulsory education to 18 is the ‘stick’ method.

There might still be a role for the EMA after 2015 – for example, it could be used as an incentive to encourage students to attain higher levels of education. “If they don’t reach certain targets, they might not be paid the EMA,” suggests Emmerson. He adds that the allowance might also get students to focus on their studies more if getting an EMA meant that they would be able to afford to do less paid work outside their studies.

Even after the school leaving age is raised to 18, the EMA might still have a role to play

Mandy Garner, freelance education journalist and former features editor of The Times Higher Education Supplement
REMEmBER WHEN THERE were just not enough hours in the day to get things done? Well, hey presto! The day just got longer. Humans can now squeeze 31 hours of activities into a single day thanks to time-saving hi-tech devices, according to new research. Users of Bluetooth and wireless internet technologies achieve in just 24 hours what would have taken them an extra seven hours just a decade ago, it says.

From its survey of 3,000 people, the consumer research company OTX pointed to the opening of emails over breakfast as the very first productivity boost of the day, typically enabled by BlackBerry-style devices. Then we continue through the day at high-speed hell.

“It makes you wonder what people were doing in the mid-1990s,” one researcher said. “Maybe they talked to each other in the evenings.”

A rather forlorn comment if ever there was one, but is the technological revolution really as pervasive as all that?

The evidence is, surely, incontrovertible: the results of the recent and rapid advances in global communications technology are all around us. Can anyone seriously doubt that these advances have had a profound and irrevocable impact on our lives, and on society in general?

The media certainly appears to have made up its mind. We are bombarded with stories and opinions about how these new gadgets seismically transform everything, both for good and for ill. The internet, we are told, is revolutionising politics, making truly participatory democracy possible.

Newspaper executives proclaim that print journalism is all but dead, just as books were consigned to history a few decades ago, with people now obtaining their news instantly from a vast array of all-singing, all-dancing websites, complete with podcasts and video.

Young people, we are warned apocalyptically, are becoming an alienated, whey-faced generation hooked on violent computer games who rarely venture out of their darkened rooms. Their attention spans are being reduced to milliseconds. The art of conversation has been vandalised by the advent of emails and text messages. Society is becoming atomised, say the doom mongers; people no longer talk to each other, they snatch conversations on their mobiles while walking the dog or commuting to work.

Many similar hopes and fears were, no doubt, spawned by earlier technological advances; this year we will mark two such milestones, the 150th anniversary of the first successful transatlantic telegraph cable and the 80th anniversary of the first colour TV transmission, courtesy of the Scottish inventor John Logie Baird.

But were the doom mongers’ predictions in these cases borne out? Television has had more than its fair share of detractors – the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright famously dubbed it “chewing gum for the eyes”.

And as with all innovations, there are plusses and minuses. It would be difficult to argue, however, that
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Is how we communicate affecting our social lives?

Online, on demand, on the go... Global communications technology has descended upon us, fundamentally changing the way we communicate. But are the effects on our social interaction as profound? Sarah Womack reviews the ESRC-funded research of Dr Ben Anderson.

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society has gone into freefall as a result of the ubiquity of television. Predictions about the effects of the new wave of technological advances may prove to be similarly overblown. That is certainly a conclusion one could draw from the ESRC research by Dr Ben Anderson of the Technology and Social Change Research Centre at Essex University. His team has carried out a fascinating and detailed study of how people in Britain, the United States, Canada, Norway and the Netherlands live their everyday lives, from the way they socialise to the way they shop, and how new technology has changed them. The results are surprising. Far from concluding that society has become ‘atomised’ or that individuals’ lives have been ‘privatised’, he has found that technology has made little impact at all. His analysis of 30 years’ worth of data between 1971 and 2003, by which time the PC, mobile phone and internet revolutions were in full swing, found that the time that people spent on their social lives – visiting or entertaining friends and going to parties – actually rose (except in Norway where other factors were in play). The advent of chat rooms and email does not seem to have dented people’s desire to share each other’s company physically. According to Dr Anderson, people simply “reinforced and maintained existing social relationships and reinvigorated failed relationships”. Turning to shopping and travel, he said that the results were inconclusive. People probably travelled more because travel had got a lot easier, and oil was at that time relatively cheap, rather than because they could now book e-tickets. And, contrary to received wisdom, people are not abandoning newspapers for the internet; those who use the internet are likely to buy traditional papers as well. The only area where Dr Anderson did record a significant shift in people’s behaviour was in the amount of time they spent outdoors. While outdoor activity, such as sport and exercise, increased during the 1980s, possibly due to the popularity of aerobics and gyms, it fell in the 1990s, while the time people spent indoors watching television and playing computer games rose. “It is not hard to see how new communication technology might be blamed for these lazier and presumably less healthy lifestyles,” he said. “The advent of technologies such as digital television, with its hundreds of channels, new-generation, sophisticated console games, faster PCs with new games, larger wide-screen TVs, the advent of the home entertainment system and the culture of doing things by telephone or internet rather than in person can all contribute to people spending more time indoors and less time outdoors.” But to blame trends such as the current obesity epidemic on technology alone is facile, he believes. For a start: “Work practices have changed and there is now far less physical labour,” he says. While acknowledging that his research only runs to 2003, his overall conclusion is that the impact of new technologies on everyday life has been “greatly overstated” and is “relatively minor and marginal”. So far from being the grand transformation beloved by commentators, there is perhaps a slow evolution underway in which consumers of the new technology work out how they want to use it. As people feed their requirements back to manufacturers, they in turn will provide cheaper and more user-friendly products. Certainly, we will be able to do things more quickly than we have in the past, and smooth our everyday transactions. But perhaps we will shape our new environment far more than we are shaped by it; human nature may be more immutable than we think.

Sarah Womack, former social affairs correspondent of The Daily Telegraph

Dr Ben Anderson’s research was carried out as an ESRC-funded project within the ESRC E-Society Programme.

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SUMMER 2008 SOCIETY NOW 25
The money, the market and the man from Today

Evan Davis, the BBC’s former economics editor and currently a presenter of the Today programme, talks to Romesh Vaitilingam about his career in economics and journalism, the role that economics plays in Britain today, and how he sees the discipline shaping the world we will live in tomorrow.

ROMESH VAITILINGAM Evan, I wonder if you could start by outlining your career?
EVAN DAVIS I studied economics at a fairly superficial level at university, carried on doing it at a less superficial level at the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) and then at a Masters level at Harvard. I then went back and acted as a researcher for John Kay at the London Business School and then spent a little more time at the IFS.

So really till I was about 30 years old, I’d only ever studied economics, worked for John Kay or worked for the IFS. Those places – the two were very linked – imbued me with everything I think about economics. And since the economics they do is very much in the world of practical policy – media-oriented, rigorous but nevertheless relevant – getting a job at the BBC didn’t feel quite as sharp a jump as it might have done.

Since then, I’ve worked my way through the BBC, from general economic news to Newsnight to being economics editor. And now I really have left the world of economics formally and am a presenter of the Today programme.

RV How has the time you spent in economics influenced the way you approach your work as a journalist?
ED It seems to me that there are essentially two types of economists: those who build models of more and more complexity to understand what’s going on in the world – the Treasury model is a good example – and those who discard information and simplify to get at the basic story. I don’t think one approach is better than the other, but some people are better cut out for one than the other.

As a low-grade academic, I noticed that I was better at discarding information than acquiring it; that skill was well deployed in journalism.

RV Can we apply that distinction more generally to the impact that economic research and economic ideas have on people’s lives. It sounds like both the ‘complexifiers’ and the ‘simplifiers’ have something to contribute. What’s your perspective on what they do for society?
ED I would like to say they add a lot to the sum of human knowledge, but the truth is that when you ask economists that question, you often find a relatively small number of papers quoted. Economists certainly make useful contributions to evidence-based policy and you can bank that. But I think a lot of the purpose of economics is not actually in the specifics of the research; it’s in providing rigorous ways of looking at issues that are helpful in understanding how the world works.

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In other words, the simplifiers have a big contribution to make. They have clear thinking that, in policy terms, is in short supply. A lot of what goes on in government and what contributes to our daily lives comes out of the simplifiers asking the right questions, looking at issues in the right way – with costs and benefits added up properly and risks taken into account – and prompting the right decisions to be made.

Both the simplifiers and the complexifiers have their purposes. But I wouldn’t underestimate how much the basic story matters in the dictation of policy as well as the detailed evidence. A good example is Nick Stern’s review of the economics of climate change. This was a powerful, complex piece of economics but its impact was less in the detail than in the simple messages drawn from it. You need the complexifiers to give the credibility but...
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ultimately it’s the simple headlines that are drawn from the complexity that actually drive things.

RV You once said that one important role for economists was to inch forward public understanding. Do you see a positive trend in the sophistication of public debate about serious policy questions?

ED Yes I do – ‘ inching forward’ is the right pace to describe it. It’s become accepted that economists have something sensible to say about transport policy, health policy, environmental policy. And in all these areas, you see economics talking – and rather more loudly here than in some other countries. This is the country with a congestion charge, which is an economist’s solution to the problem of urban congestion as opposed to madcap schemes based on number plates.

I think the British have come to respect microeconomics in a way that some other countries don’t, and that’s why we have a more economics-driven trade agenda, a better approach to transport policy and why we have taken a robust line on lots of other issues. And in macroeconomic policy, we have one of the most eminent economists in the country running the Bank of England.

RV What about the role of economics in the particularly difficult economic circumstances we currently face?

ED I think this episode is slightly embarrassing for economists, net. We’ve talked about trying to end the cycle of booms and busts and congratulated ourselves on the improved framework for policy, and yet we’ve allowed ourselves to have a 19th century-style bank run and a house price crash. Even if we’re not in the forecasting business, we ought to have been in the business of saying that the current situation was unsustainable and various scenarios could play out badly.

In fairness, economists were pretty good at saying that there are global imbalances and the housing market might fall. And I don’t think you would necessarily expect economists to predict the particular nature of the crisis – that it would come out of sub-prime and lead to an overall credit crunch. But the question we have to ask ourselves – particularly those of us who have been in communication – is did we do enough to warn people that there could be a very bumpy patch? I think the answer is that we did try to tell people but we didn’t try hard enough. In particular, we failed to tell people that when times turn bad, lots of things can get bad simultaneously.

One reason why we didn’t do enough is that there’s a mood pervading both the economics profession and the public at large that is only receptive to a particular message at a particular time and blanks out anything not consistent with that message. Only when the narrative changes, when this sort of economic earthquake occurs, are we receptive to all the other news.

RV Can economists provide us with the tools to get out of these difficulties?

ED I’m not sure it’s going to be economic answers as much as trying to foolproof the human systems that run these economic systems. There’s a very good TV programme called Air Crash Investigation that analyses what went wrong in various plane disasters. In a surprisingly large number of cases, there’s a small human failing in a very sophisticated system. For example, one crash happened because the covers had been left on altitude indicators after some routine cleaning.

Now, obviously, the aeroplane engineers could say that we need more sophisticated ways of making our planes failsafe. But equally, we need to ask what is the weakest link in these very sophisticated systems. If the cleaner can do something that is mission-critical for the survival of the plane, you’d better think more about the human processes as well as the engineering issues.

I think there are economic analogies here. For me, one of the most interesting things to come out of recent economic events is the degree to which you need to look at human factors as well as economic ones and not always assume that there’s an economic model of rationality that underpins human behaviour. It might be that we’re evolving towards rationality, but in the meantime, we could allow ourselves a slightly faster pace of evolution if we study the human factors.

RV Let’s finish with a long-term question about the value of economic growth to the average citizen: the question about Queen Elizabeth I’s standard of living.

ED I take the view that the average citizen today does have a better standard of living than Queen Elizabeth I and that is the result of a set of institutions – an economic system – that delivers growth. And the best thing about the two, two and a half per cent growth rate that we expect each year and have come to demand is that it allows hope. It allows us to feel that things might be better next year, and if we all believe the cake is getting bigger, it makes all sorts of arguments easier to resolve.

Or put it this way, Nick Stern’s review says that the cost of measures to tackle climate change is one per cent of GDP. Expressing it as billions of pounds of present value sounds quite a lot, but putting it in growth terms, I could say that it just means forgoing the last six months of our economic growth and going back to the trajectory thereafter. That really doesn’t sound like much of a sacrifice. Projecting and expecting two per cent growth each year makes life a lot more than two per cent easier.

Romesh Vaitilingam, economics journalist

You need to look at human factors and not always assume that there’s an economic model of rationality that underpins human behaviour...
Publications

Private Equity, Corporate Governance and the Dynamics of Capital Market Regulation
This book addresses the implications of private equity providers for the governance of corporations, the capital markets in which they operate and the professionals who provide corporate advisory services. It is an output from ESRC funding that evaluates and ranks the precise nature of the risk posed by private equity by situating it within an overarching analysis of the dynamics of financial capitalism.

Private Equity, Corporate Governance and the Dynamics of Capital Market Regulation by Justin O’Brien of the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics and Charles Sturt University, Australia. Published by Imperial College Press. ISBN 9781860948473. 424pp. £55.00. For more information and ordering details, visit http://www.icpress.co.uk

Risk in Social Science
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Free Trade Nation
‘Fair trade’ goods, bags and meetings have become part of our everyday life. ‘Free trade’, by contrast, is viewed as a conspiracy of rich multinationals and international organisations. Free Trade Nation is an output from the ESRC and the Arts and Humanities Research Council Cultures of Consumption Programme. It is the story of how free trade became a defining part of British identity and politics and how it lost its moral high ground after the First World War. The book offers a fresh look at a chapter in British and world history, while at the same time providing a historical perspective on today’s debate about globalisation, challenging the ways we have come to think about trade, justice and democracy.

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A-LEVEL IN ANTHROPOLOGY
During the second year of ESRC funding, the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) has succeeded in its initial steps on the road to developing an A-level in Anthropology. The RAI will work with the AQA Awarding Body on the development of the qualification. Following and subject to accreditation, the RAI and AQA anticipate working together to support delivery and resourcing of the A-level, which is expected to become the flagship of the RAI’s programme of education in anthropology at pre-university and further education levels. For more information, visit http://www.therai.org.uk

ESRC ANNUAL REPORT 2007-08
From reporting on our world-class research to listing the most up-to-date facts and figures, the ESRC’s Annual Report is available to all. The Report is laid before Parliament annually before the summer recess and will be published in late July. For more information, visit http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk

SCIENCE AND MATHEMATICS INITIATIVE
Figures have shown that fewer and fewer young people are taking up places on degree courses in science- and mathematics-based subjects. These subjects are vital for people who want to work within the new technologies and innovative businesses areas. Therefore, as part of a commitment to finding new ways of encouraging children and young people to a greater achievement and understanding of science and mathematics, the ESRC, in partnership with other Research Councils, the Institute of Physics, the Department of Children, Schools and Families, and the Gatsby Foundation, has invested £3 million to fund five projects across the UK. For more information, visit http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk

LLAKES – LEARNING AND LIFE CHANCES
The ESRC’s new Learning and Life Chances in the Knowledge Economies and Societies (LLAKES) Centre was launched in June at the House of Commons. The Centre, based at the Institute of Education, aims to investigate the role of lifelong learning in promoting economic competitiveness and social cohesion by mediating the interactions between the two. Hosted by Gordon Marsden MP, speakers included the Rt Hon John Denham MP, Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, and Professor Andy Green, Director of the LLAKES Centre. For more information, visit http://www.ioe.ac.uk

PEOPLE
Stephen Redding and Silvana Tenreyro have been selected as two of the winners of the 2008 Excellence Award in Global Economic Affairs. Dr Stephen Redding, programme director of the globalisation programme at the Centre for Economic Performance (CEP), and Silvana Tenreyro, lecturer in economics in the Department of Economics, London School of Economics, have been selected as two of the winners of the 2008 Excellence Award in Global Economic Affairs by the Kiel Institute for the World Economy. The aim of the award is to build a community of the brightest young researchers in the area of global economic affairs. The researchers are given intellectual, financial, and administrative support to pursue focused programmes of research in designated areas. The CEP is an interdisciplinary research centre at the LSE Research Laboratory. It was established by the ESRC in 1990 and is now one of the leading economic research groups in Europe.
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LAUNCH OF THE GAMBLING RESEARCH GROUP

The Gambling Research Group, directed by Dr Glenda Reith of the University of Glasgow’s Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Applied Social Science, aims to bring together a network of individuals based in national and international institutions. They will focus on the impacts of gambling and problem gambling. For more information, visit https://je-s.rcuk.ac.uk

TYNDALL CENTRE WINS SILVER MEDAL

The Tyndall Centre has been awarded a Silver Lindley Medal at this year’s Royal Chelsea Flower Show. The Centre’s 2050 Garden was commended for its special scientific interest. It was the concept and design of Tyndall Centre researchers Johanna Forster and Saffron O’Neill. The garden reflected upon the traditional English garden of the 1950s before looking to the gardens of 2050 under a changed climate. Funded by both the ESRC and the Natural Environment Research Council, the Tyndall Centre is based at the University of East Anglia and works to develop sustainable responses to climate change. For more information, visit http://www.tyndall.ac.uk

JE-S PEER REVIEW

Peer reviewers will soon be able to use the RCUK Joint Electronic Submission system to complete and submit their reviews online to the ESRC. In line with other research councils, we plan to adopt this functionality for proposals received after 7 July 2008. There are a number of benefits in terms of improved efficiency of the peer-review process, to individual reviewers, who can more easily access all the relevant information necessary to complete their reviews, and to assessors, who will benefit from more complete reviews. Applicants whose proposals have a ‘right to reply’ will also be able to compile and submit their response to the reviewers’ comments using the Je-S system. For more information about the Je-S, visit https://je-s.rcuk.ac.uk

EVENTS

2-5 SEPTEMBER 2008

4th Annual Conference 2008: Cultural Citizenship

Held at St Hugh’s College, University of Oxford, the 4th Annual Cultural Citizenship Conference seeks to explore the inter-relationships between citizenship and culture and their contemporary social, cultural and political significance in a number of different contexts. For more information, visit http://www.cresc.ac.uk/events/conference2008/index.html

6-11 SEPTEMBER 2008

The BA Festival of Science 2008

The British Association Festival of Science is one of the UK’s biggest celebrations of science. Annually it attracts around 400 of the best scientists and science communicators from home and abroad who reveal the latest developments in research to a general audience. This year, the festival will visit Liverpool as part of the city’s European Capital of Culture status, offering a programme celebrating science, engineering and technology across Europe. For more information, visit http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/FestivalofScience/

9-11 SEPTEMBER 2008

Vital Signs: Researching Real Life

Vital Signs is an international and interdisciplinary conference organised by Real Life Methods and held at the University of Manchester. It will provide a forum for the discussion of approaches to researching real lives in complex worlds. The concept of ‘real lives’ will be used in an open way to stimulate debate about how research methodologies and methods in the social sciences and beyond can rise to the challenge of producing knowledge and understandings that are ‘vital’ and that resonate with complex and multi-dimensional lived realities. For more information, visit http://www.reallifemethods.ac.uk/events/vitalsigns

5-8 OCTOBER 2008

2008 NCRI Cancer Conference

The NCRI Cancer Conference offers unique opportunities for networking and sharing knowledge by bringing together the leading experts from all cancer research disciplines. The National Cancer Research Institute Conference, held at the International Conference Centre in Birmingham, is the major forum in the UK for showcasing the best British and international cancer research. For more information, visit http://www.ncri.org.uk/ncricconference

22 OCTOBER-2 NOVEMBER

Cambridge Festival of Ideas 2008

The University of Cambridge will be holding a new Festival of Ideas, working in partnership with Anglia Ruskin University and many other local organisations. The Festival will celebrate the rich history of arts, humanities and social sciences at the University and within Cambridge. The programme will include a series of evening lectures showcasing the innovative and exciting research from ESRC-funded academics and others. These will complement over 100 free events on offer to visitors of all ages, with activities covering lectures, workshops, exhibitions, open days, performances and hands-on activities. For more information, visit http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/communications/community/arts

27-28 OCTOBER

Genomics and Society: Reinventing Life?

This conference, hosted by the ESRC Genomics Network, seeks to ask questions such as: How can society keep up with new advances in genomics? What will be the global impact of genomics-based technologies? And will developments in genetic engineering reinvent life? The conference will focus on the future impact of genomics and provide the opportunity for knowledge exchange across society. Policymakers, academic researchers, industry representatives and citizens’ groups will be interested in attending. For more information, visit http://www.genomicsandsociety.org
A new magazine for ESRC

Society Now is the new regular ESRC magazine focusing on raising awareness of our research and its impact. Aimed at a wide range of readers from the MP to the businessman, the voluntary worker to the teacher, the public through to the social scientist, it will be published three times a year (spring, summer, and early autumn).

Society Now replaces The Edge magazine and the ESRC newsletter Social Sciences and offers a readable, intelligent, concise overview of current issues concerning society.

In addition to Society Now earlier this year we launched a bi-monthly e-newsletter, containing corporate news and funding opportunities aimed at the academic community. If you would like to sign-up for the new ESRC e-newsletter register at:

http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/enewsreg

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funds research into the big social and economic questions facing us today. We also develop and train the UK’s future social scientists.

Our research informs public policies and helps make businesses, voluntary bodies and other organisations more effective. Most importantly, it makes a real difference to all our lives.

The ESRC is an independent organisation, established by Royal Charter in 1965, and funded mainly by the Government.

More at http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk

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Society Now (Print) ISSN 1758-2121