Difficult days ahead
What future for hard Brexit?

Portes vs Gove: The real value of experts

Ireland: How can a post-Brexit border work?

Voices: Developing a new approach to mental health
Welcome to the Summer issue of Society Now, the ESRC’s regular magazine which showcases the impact of the social science research we fund.

This is an unusual issue in that much of it was written before the June General Election was called. As a consequence, many of the articles have been updated to reflect the surprise result, with authors speculating at short notice on what impact the Conservative-DUP informal coalition may have on the Brexit negotiations, the impact of Brexit on Ireland's borders, or even the UK benefits system.

We have a report on the debate on the roles of experts and politicians between Michael Gove MP and Professor Jonathan Portes. And a feature examines how linking together multiple sources of existing data brings a new dimension to research to have a positive effect on health and wellbeing.

Opinion pieces examine our relationship with robotics and what can be done to counter fake news. And we interview Professor Louise Arseneault who explains why, with an ageing population, it is important to think about mental health when young.

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Professor Louise Arseneault, the ESRC’s first mental health champion, explains the importance of a cross-disciplinary approach to mental health.
Poor religious literacy in the UK is a widespread and substantial problem which inhibits an effective assessment and response to religion-related security challenges, according to recent research into the relationship between religion and society.

“During the two-year project we explored two concepts that people find tricky: religion and security and how they interact with each other,” says researcher Professor John Wolffe. “What emerged is the importance of ensuring that responses to ongoing security challenges are informed by a more sophisticated understanding of religion and of the subtleties in how religious groups operate.

“Equally clear is that while people can see religion as a threat to security, very often it may actually be part of a solution to social and community tensions,” says Professor Wolffe. Religiously-motivated groups and individuals have played substantial roles in peacebuilding and conflict prevention. Such work tends to be under-reported. It is much easier – and superficially more interesting – to report and analyse a conflict that did happen than to assess the extent to which ongoing patient interventions have prevented one that did not happen.

The study dismisses any notion of a simple ‘cause and effect’ perspective whereby ‘dangerous’ or conflicted religious ideas lead people to violent action. Rather, research points to a complex combination of circumstances that can spark violence. Hence, seeking simple and short-term solutions is likely to prove counterproductive.

Lessons from the Northern Ireland experience need to be better understood in other parts of the UK, says Professor Wolffe. “It is significant in highlighting the counterproductive consequences of alienating whole communities by measures to control an ‘extremist’ minority; and of the long-term risk of achieving coexistence by segregation rather than integration.”

The study points out that it is unrealistic to anticipate that secularisation will provide a long-term solution to religious conflict. In some locations, notably London, the decline in organised religion has halted or even gone into reverse. Committed religious minorities will persist, and are likely to have difficult relationships with wider society in a climate of widespread religious illiteracy.

Better understanding of religion is needed in policy thinking and among the public. Government needs to develop more effective mechanisms for taking religious factors into account in domestic and foreign policy development by, for example, establishing a unit/office which draws on insights from academia and religious groups. “This could be important as the UK looks to the wider world following Brexit,” says Professor Wolffe. 

Religiously-motivated groups and individuals have played substantial roles in peacebuilding and conflict prevention.

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ESRC Grant Number ES/K00025X/1
RESOURCE DISTRIBUTION
Younger generations are widely viewed to have been relatively disadvantaged by economic and demographic changes over the last 30 years, and now find it harder to finance their education, buy a house, and save for retirement than their parents did. New research will explore how generational wellbeing has changed over this period and help policymakers assess the intergenerational effect of different policy initiatives going forward.
ESRC grant number ES/P000142/1

CHINA’S ECONOMY
One of the most important macroeconomic developments in coming decades will be China’s rapid financial integration into the world economy. At the same time, the ramifications on the Chinese economy – the world’s second largest – are still largely unknown. Researchers aim to study the impact of its financial liberalisation for both China and for the rest of the world.
ESRC grant number ES/P004253/1

UNIVERSITY ADMISSION
How fair are university admissions decisions? Researchers will explore whether university applicants are equally likely to be offered university places if they are equally well-qualified, and investigate whether different aspects of prior attainment explain why university applicants from lower social class backgrounds and ethnic minority groups are less likely to be offered places than their middle class and white peers.
ESRC grant number ES/P002579/1

IN BRIEF
HIV study highlights difficulties for teens
TEENAGERS FACE A range of challenges in adhering to their HIV treatment, suggests a new study of adolescent HIV treatment care in Uganda. “Adhering to HIV treatment is critical to determining long-term health outcomes, yet presents specific challenges for young people,” says researcher Professor Tim Rhodes.
Problems with sticking to a daily medication regime are not a question of knowledge, researchers found. All interviewees knew how and when to take their drugs. Instead, for both children and teenagers, treatment-taking generally depended on their relationships with others. “Participants found it generally easier to adhere if parents or carers could help them remember to take their medication, support them when they had difficulties taking pills and/or were taking antiretroviral therapy themselves,” says co-researcher Dr Sarah Bernays.
“Non-adherence was partly to do with forgetting doses and being too busy, but also with more complicated social reasons, including fear of being seen taking medicines and of others deducing their HIV status; a lack of privacy to store or take their pills; and frustration about how they were told to take their medication,” she says.
Young people also faced similar adherence challenges to those reported by adults such as seeing pills as an unwelcome reminder of their HIV and struggling with side-effects including dizziness, fatigue and lack of concentration. Many young people tackled these side-effects on their own by, for example, taking treatment breaks, but without seeking advice from clinicians about these coping strategies.
Children and teenagers, researchers discovered, often learnt not to disclose missed doses for fear of being scolded or of damaging their own reputation as ‘good’ patients. Conversely, young people really appreciated acknowledgement from those supporting them that taking treatment everyday without fail was not easy.
While knowledge of the need to take HIV treatment was high, understanding of HIV, how they acquired it or its impact on their future was frequently not. Young people were often instructed (both in the clinic and at home) to keep their HIV status secret but once they began having sexual relationships they were berated for non-disclosure.
“We need to help young people be honest about their adherence problems and support them as they move from adolescence into adulthood,” says Dr Bernays. “Talking openly with young people about how to manage these risk periods of change and transition is key to equipping them for a lifetime of treatment-taking and management of their HIV.”

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Hydropower should help local people

China's engagement in the finance and construction of hydropower dam projects in low- and middle-income countries in Africa and Asia has widened opportunities for these countries to attract large investments and build up energy and water management infrastructure, says research.

But dam building has had contentious socioeconomic impacts for local populations such as the forced resettlement of 10,000 indigenous people for the building of Malaysia's Bakun dam. Researchers recommend that dam builders and national governments safeguard the livelihoods of people directly affected by dams, and rigorously conduct environmental impact assessments for ecological mitigation and protection. Robust national legislation and policies are key. China could also better contribute as a global leader in alternative low-carbon energy technologies such as wind, solar and small hydro, create more acceptable opportunities than large dams, while benefiting from new markets and first-mover advantage.

High cost credit first option for many

Payday loans receive a great deal of publicity, but a recent study by The Young Foundation working with the Welsh Government finds that other forms of credit – home credit or doorstep loans and rent-to-own (hire purchase) – are far more widely used yet have received far less scrutiny.

Research into high-cost credit across Wales found it to have a negative impact on people's wellbeing. Half of those taking out high-cost loans experience anxiety and stress as a result of this debt. So why choose such costly credit and what are the alternatives?

Findings reveal that almost two thirds of people (65 per cent) turn straight to high-cost credit without considering different types of credit or comparing offers between lenders. More than 70 per cent of high-cost credit customers think that these types of borrowing are normal. And, as hire purchase and doorstep loans have largely avoided negative publicity, they are seen as acceptable choices.

Based on conversations with 100 customers and 26 stakeholders, The Young Foundation recommendations include greater regulatory support and use of social finance to fund innovation. They also advise steps to expand affordable finance through, for example, new consumer credit, savings products and strengthening credit unions.

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IN BRIEF

Motivated by kids

Many charities assume they can enhance support by putting children front and centre in their campaigns. New research will test whether children cause an increase in adults' prosocial motivation; in other words, that children inspire adults to transcend their own needs and be more considerate of others in general. Findings will increase understanding of the role children play in adult social cognition and behaviour.

ESRC grant number ES/P002463/1

Migration flows

Migration flows within the global South (rather than flows from the global South to the global North) have important implications for inclusive economic growth that creates opportunities for all society, and where monetary and non-monetary benefits are fairly distributed. The Migration for Inclusive African Growth network will explore how inclusive growth is, and can be, in Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya and Mozambique.

ESRC grant number ES/P006558/1

Social inclusivity

Ensuring equal opportunities for individuals from ethnic and religious minorities is essential for cities that want to be inclusive. The Socially Inclusive Cities Network will focus on how research might help reduce the inequalities and unfairness that can lead to public unrest and unstable societies. Workshops in India, Kenya, Nigeria, Vietnam and the UK will identify common issues and knowledge gaps.

ESRC grant number ES/P007384/1
IN BRIEF

EMERGENCY RESPONSE
The ‘Data Awareness for Sending Help’ (DASH) project aims to explore the potential of new data sources for improving ambulance response times. The project builds on a research collaboration between King’s College London and the London Ambulance Service (LAS) which is evaluating novel methods for ambulance dispatch by simulating ambulance call-outs based on historical LAS system logs.
ESRC grant number ES/P011160/1

LIFE AFTER PUNISHMENT
The Distant Voices project responds to pressing public policy and political challenges created by rising numbers of people subject to penal sanctions and by high levels of reoffending. Turning conventional understandings of offender rehabilitation on their head, this study is concerned not with ‘correcting offenders’ but rather with exploring and changing how they are received when ‘coming home’ after punishment.
ESRC grant number ES/P002536/1

DIGITAL BENEFITS
The benefits of digital work and trade appear to flow more to big corporations in the global North than to workers, enterprises or governments in the global South. The new ‘Development Implications of Digital Economies’ (DIODE) Strategic network aims to help ensure that digital economies work to deliver development goals by filling key knowledge gaps about digital economies in the global South.
ESRC grant number ES/P006329/1

China beats Russia at innovation
DESPITE HISTORICAL AND current parallels in their policies, China is now more clearly becoming a leading power in science and innovation than Russia, suggests research.
Thirty years ago both countries had similar levels of R&D investment and scientific publication outputs, with comparable institutions leading on research, in particular the respective national Academies of Science. But while China has improved its performance on a range of innovation indicators, Russia has lagged. Among the reasons, say researchers, is that China is more open to internationalisation and talent migration and has upgraded its research and innovation systems. In contrast, Russian research activities remain centralised around the Russian Academy of Sciences with little scientist/private sector exchange and less return migration of expatriate researchers.

Better prisoner visiting vital
PRISONERS WHO MAINTAIN family relationships while in prison are less likely to reoffend. Positive experiences of being visited in jail are important in keeping relationships on track, research suggests. Taking steps to ensure prisoner visits can be as positive as possible – both for prisoners and visitors – can reduce reoffending, says researcher Dr Dominique Moran.
In a three-year study of prison visitation and recidivism in the UK, researchers explored the spaces in which prison visits took place and the quality of the experience. Often, the setting for visits is a very large open space, containing chairs and low tables bolted to the floor with the onus on safety and surveillance. “As a result, it’s often extremely noisy, with lots of reverberation from the hard surfaces,” Dr Moran says. “The way the furniture is fixed to the floor can mean a visitor is closer to the conversation going on behind them, than to the person they have come to visit. Overall, it can be extremely difficult to hold the kind of conversation that is likely to support a relationship.”
If prison visiting is recognised to be important to rehabilitation, then more attention should be paid to the spaces in which visits take place. “It’s possible to do a lot with these spaces – including the use of carpet to reduce noise levels, better spacing of tables, a mix of spaces, upholstered furniture, colourful wall displays – that can facilitate good interactions while mitigating against the security risks inherent in visits,” she says. Prisons should also pay greater attention to improving the frequently stressful experience of visitors which can be exacerbated by the negative view in which they are held by some prison staff.

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HOUSEHOLDS IN BRITAIN are three times less likely to be burgled today than in 1993. Yet the relative risk of burglary is now much higher for some groups in society than others, says recent research.

“The distribution of burglary in our society has become much more unjust,” says researcher Professor Andromachi Tseloni. “Today, social renters are three times more at risk of being burgled than homeowners. The relative risk of burglary is also greater for groups such as lone parents, ethnic minority households, low-income households and those living in deprived areas.”

Increased security, researchers believe, has played a major role in the fall in burglary rates over the past 25 years. Research led by Professor Tseloni finds that a combination of just four specific burglary devices offers 49 times more protection than having no security at all. Fitting window locks, interior lights and timer, double or deadlocks and external lights (WIDE) is the most effective security combination.

Adding any more security measures on top of WIDE does not afford any further protection and, interestingly, a burglar alarm on its own appears to increase burglary risk and, added onto other measures, reduces their combined protection. Fitting external lights on a sensor appears to provide the greatest protection against burglary if only one device can be afforded.

The study finds that groups such as social renters who are most vulnerable to burglary also have lower levels of security protection for their homes than others. The level of reported burglary has remained constant at some 700,000 cases a year for the past 12 years. Further reductions in burglary crime would, researchers believe, only be achievable if resources were now focused on those groups at higher risk of burglary.

“In our view, local authorities and social landlords should upgrade their properties with the WIDE security combination recommended by our research,” says Professor Tseloni. “Raising awareness of WIDE, introducing neighbourhood watch type initiatives and replacing poor windows and doors for home owners who cannot afford that expense are some of the other measures that could help ensure that certain groups in society do not suffer unduly from criminal activity.”

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The appeal of constituency campaigning

TECHNOLOGY MAY NEVER replace traditional political campaigning, suggests recent research. Despite a sharp rise in modern approaches such as e-campaigning, there is a near constant – the electoral effectiveness of traditional modes of campaigning.

“This approach delivers positive payoffs more often than not,” researcher Professor Justin Fisher points out. “Approaches such as e-campaigning may not be alternatives to traditionalism. Rather, they will always play a supporting role to the enduring positive impact of campaign approaches that have far longer roots.”

Findings show that the constituency campaigns of all three main Great Britain political parties as well as UKIP delivered electoral benefits in the 2015 General Election despite the increased level of multi-party competition. In terms of successful campaigning, research reveals that 2015 was the election when Conservative constituency campaigns ‘clicked’, when previously the party had struggled to target resources effectively. Labour and Liberal Democrat campaigns also delivered positive electoral gains, suggesting, if nothing else, that their results could have been even worse had their campaigns not been so well-managed.

“What is clear for all parties is that face-to-face campaigning delivers positive electoral benefits,” explains Professor Fisher. “Regardless of technological developments, the human touch still matters and seemingly has more impact on voters.”
THE CYBER THREAT to nuclear weapons is real and growing, suggests new research into the challenge posed by information warfare and cyber weapons to the safe and secure command and control of nuclear forces. “Cyber threats are revolutionising the nuclear order and creating a host of new problems, vulnerabilities and risks,” says researcher Dr Andrew Futter.

The safe, secure and reliable management of nuclear weapons has always been a complicated business, plagued by uncertainty and risks, Dr Futter points out. But these challenges are being magnified and aggravated by new cyber tools, dynamics and capabilities, and from the threat posed by hackers, seeing to gain access to, or interfere with, nuclear systems.

Defining ‘cyber threat’ is in itself problematic. “At present, there’s a lot of hype and misunderstanding particularly around the term cyber-attack which can be interpreted as anything from spam emails to sabotage, destruction and possibly war,” he explains. Lack of consensus on the scope and challenge of cyber underpins much of the current disagreement about the level and nature of the threat.

He says that as cyber threats increase then everybody in the world will become less secure. Terrorist threat aside, even ever increasing software and coding complexity increases the likelihood of accidents. People may believe, for example, that nuclear submarines are invulnerable but everything that relies on computer coding can never be 100% secure.

“At present we seem to be marching towards a new era of instability and insecurity. Cyber is exacerbating problems already inherent in nuclear systems as well as creating new concerns. Now is the time to recognise the problems that will arise in a world where nuclear weapons will always remain vulnerable and consider how far such weapons continue to represent a viable means of security,” he says.

**UK Asylum appeals inconsistent**

AROUND THREE QUARTERS of claims for asylum in the UK are currently refused although applicants have a right of appeal. However, asylum appeal processes are inconsistent and differ according to where an appeal is heard and the gender of the judge and asylum seeker, finds research into asylum determination procedures.

Findings from a three-year study identify considerable differences between the 13 hearing centres where asylum applicants’ appeals are heard, and significant inconsistencies in the practice of judges who decide appeals.

A key difference between hearing centres is the frequency with which appellants can obtain legal representation, varying from 6% to over a quarter among the hearing centres that formed the basis of the study. When researchers watched judges to determine how frequently they undertook certain best practices, they found that judges adhered to 13 observed best practices only around half of the time on average.

“We advocate a clear, accessible online introduction to the hearing in a variety of languages that appellants can watch beforehand, as well as increased independent, external monitoring and assessment of practice in hearings, greater communication between hearing centres and enhanced training for judges,” says Professor Nick Gill.

**Cyber threat is making everyone less secure**

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IN BRIEF

ANTIBIOTIC OVERUSE
Corporate food retailers play a pivotal but frequently ignored role in tackling antimicrobial resistance (AMR). The overuse of antibiotics on farm animals is leading to growing resistance among certain bacteria such as E-coli. Researchers aim to address the responsibility of retailers in tackling the AMR challenge through chicken and pork supply chains and investigate the retailers’ future role. ESRC grant number ES/P011586/1

ONLINE HATE CRIME
The UK Government’s Hate Crime Action Plan stresses the need to tackle hate speech on social media by bringing together policymakers with academics to improve the analysis and understanding of the patterns and causes of cyberhate and how these can be addressed. New research aims to assist policymakers in identifying areas that require policy attention and better targeted interventions in the field of online hate. ESRC grant number ES/P010695/1

GREEN GROWTH
The green economy has significant potential for delivering inclusive economic development in Africa. With work focused on three countries – Ethiopia, Kenya and Nigeria – researchers will address key questions such as: what are the current greening activities taking place in Africa; what are the successes, challenges, synergies and trade-offs associated with greening in Africa; and how do these differ across countries? ESRC grant number ES/P006671/1

SUMMER 2017 SOCIETY NOW

No social mobility from life-long learning

QUALIFICATIONS GAINED THROUGH life-long learning primarily maintain, rather than narrow, inequalities in life-chances based on social class, according to a study of the role of education in intergenerational social mobility in Britain. Findings offer no evidence that further education gives individuals from a less advantaged start in life a second chance to enhance their upward class career mobility, other than in quite limited ways. Rather, children coming from managerial and professional backgrounds benefit most from further education. Post-school education and training do not appear to be the most effective way to promote intergenerational social mobility, say researchers. Instead, policy interventions that target children from disadvantaged backgrounds in pre- and early school years.

Autism guidance for legal profession

AUTISM AFFECTS approximately one in 100 people in the UK. Involvement with the criminal justice system can be especially difficult for someone with autism. To ensure fair and appropriate access to justice, research projects led by Professor Lucy Henry and Dr Katie Maras have raised awareness of challenges about autism in the criminal justice system, and provided new guidelines for legal professionals.

Professor Henry explored how children with autism fared in a mock criminal investigation, finding that adaptations which successfully supported typical children did not always help autistic children. Dr Maras found that current police techniques effective for typical adults do not necessarily work for autistic adults.

Problems with social interaction, language and communication and also reliance on routines and predictability can all make contact with the police stressful for people with autism. “It is essential that police are equipped with role-specific training about autism, and have the institutional support to adapt their procedures to better support people with autism,” says Dr Maras.

The researchers have developed guidance for police and barristers on the most effective methods for working with witnesses and defendants with autism, as well as highlighting the sensory difficulties in sight, sound, touch, taste, smell, balance and body awareness which may cause stress.

Autism guidance for legal profession

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A question of benefits

In April the government introduced cuts to the benefits system. Tom Waters of the Institute for Fiscal Studies examines the main effects of the changes, who is and will be affected, and the ways in which future recipients of the allowance may respond.

April saw the introduction of significant cuts to the generosity of the working-age benefits system. New recipients of employment and support allowance deemed healthy enough to carry out ‘work related activities’ will get up to £1,500 less each year than existing recipients. Combined with reductions in benefits through tax credits and universal credit for families with new-born third and subsequent children, the changes are expected to reduce government spending by over £5 billion a year in the long run.

Cut to employment and support allowance

Employment and support allowance (ESA) is the main out-of-work benefit for working age individuals who are judged not to be ‘fit for work’ due to a health condition. There are currently around 2.4 million individuals claiming ESA, of whom 350,000 are waiting for a health assessment, 1.6 million are in the ‘support group’, and 400,000 are the ‘work-related activity group’ (WRAG). The latter are those deemed healthy enough to carry out ‘work-related activities’, such as CV preparation or skills training.

Since April new WRAG claimants receive £73.10 a week – the same as jobseekers’ allowance (JSA) claimants – rather than £102.15 a week as was previously the case (those in the support group are unaffected). This change will not create immediate losses of benefit income, because only new recipients are affected. Ultimately though, of course, all claims will be assessed under the new, less generous rules. To give a sense of how quickly this will cut the generosity of benefits in practice, in the recent past around 60,000 people a year have started an ESA claim and ended up in WRAG – so we would expect approximately that number to get less money over the coming year than they would otherwise have got. In the long run this is expected to save the government about £650 million per year, with around 500,000 recipients getting £1,400 a year less than they would otherwise have got, on average.

What do we know about the sorts of people who are placed in the ESA WRAG? First, around half of them are entitled to ESA because of mental or behavioural disorders. Second, they tend to be somewhat older than JSA claimants, with about half being between 30 and the state pension age compared to about a quarter for JSA. Third, they tend to be on ESA for a relatively long time. Hence, while this change will align the weekly entitlements of ESA WRAG and JSA claimants, it is worth bearing in mind that the ESA claimants will tend to live on these amounts for substantially longer – around four in five WRAG claimants have been claiming for over two years, compared to less than one in five for JSA.

People might respond to this change in several ways. First, they may not choose to claim ESA in the first place: as JSA will afford the same financial support as WRAG, the financial incentives to go through the medical assessment rather than accept the additional work conditions of JSA are reduced. Second, those placed in the WRAG might challenge the decision to try to get into the support group and receive the now much higher entitlement. At the moment around 20% of those placed in WRAG challenge the decision at least once, so there is considerable scope for this to become more prevalent.

Third, as the government’s policy costing document points out, they may try to claim other benefits. The main option available is personal independence payment – a non-means tested disability benefit. Not only does this provide income directly (between £22 and £141.10 per week), but receipt can also be an automatic passport to higher ESA entitlements.

Fourth, they could move into work. Claimants may be constrained in the extent to which they can respond in this way – WRAG claimants have after all been declared by the government to have ‘limited capability for work’. On the other hand, a DWP survey found that 30% of WRAG claimants are already looking for work, and some research suggests that employment decisions among the disabled can be sensitive to the level of disability payments. However, many – perhaps the majority – will not respond in any of these ways and will therefore have to make do with an average of £1,400 a year less than they would otherwise have got.

A DWP survey found that 30% of WRAG claimants are already looking for work.

Tom Waters is a research economist at the Institute for Fiscal Studies and works in the Income, Work and Welfare sector. Web www.ifs.org.uk/people/profile/3763
The majority of allowance recipients may have to make do with an average of £1,400 less a year.
The potential is what drives many of us to work in robotics. In my own research on swarm engineering, I aim to design systems that work in large numbers (greater than 1,000) and at small scales (smaller than 1cm). I’ve designed algorithms for swarms of flying robots that could create communication networks in disaster areas. I’ve taken inspiration from ants, and their ability to form trails to your picnic table, to design new ways to deploy hundreds of robots to one day search and monitor the environment, and I’m now focused on understanding how we can make trillions of nanoparticles that work together to fight cancer.

Like most roboticists, I believe my work could have a positive impact on society, yet sometimes my work is not portrayed that way. A recent article in the media said: ‘Sabine Hauert wants to inject cancer patients with a trillion killer nanobots.’ They were talking about cancer-killing robots, but still… I’m sure you’ve come across similar headlines about nefarious uses of robots, and the inevitability of robots taking jobs, waging war, and leading to the apocalypse. While there are excellent journalists covering important issues in robotics, much of the recent coverage is driven by science fiction and the monetisation of clicks.

The way robotics is portrayed in the public matters. As part of the Royal Society’s working group on machine learning, we learned that only 9% of the UK population knows the term ‘machine learning’, although they know of applications of the technology such as autonomous cars and voice assistants on their mobile phones. Of those who had heard of applications of machine learning, 75% had heard of it from mainstream media, and 21% from entertainment. Headlines and popular science fiction are largely driving the public’s understanding of a technology that will affect their daily lives. This could influence policy, the diversity of students who decide to enter STEM fields, the translational potential of the technology, and ultimately its uptake.

It’s clear therefore that we need to do a better job dehyping robotics and showing the potential of the technology. That’s what we do at Robohub.org, a non-profit that I run to help roboticists communicate with the public about their work. But we also need to hear from the public, about what they would like to see the technology do for them. What are the helpers they need in their daily lives? How could it make their work or life better? And what are their concerns?

The Royal Society’s report for example showed that the public worries about Artificial Intelligences not being trustworthy, replacing them, hindering their personal experience, or harming them. They also worry that the benefits of the technology will not be shared by all. These are real issues we can only address if we ground the discussion in reality.

Many of the lofty goals I mention above are years away; robots are still hard to design, and only good at very specific tasks. This means we can shape the direction of the field going forward. But if we don’t have a meaningful discussion about this now, the full potential of the technology may be hindered, and that wouldn’t benefit anyone.
As campaigning in the UK General Election gained momentum in April 2017, the Chairman of the Government's Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee called for Facebook to improve its handling of fake news on the platform. Referencing concerns that the spread of false stories across social media had influenced the results of the 2016 US Presidential election, Damian Collins MP suggested that the propagation of content of this kind could threaten the ‘integrity of democracy’.

Worries over the apparent prevalence of false content online and its capacity to have significant offline effects have grown rapidly over the past year and fake news has become an established social problem. Whilst the spread of rumour has always been a feature of social life, we can observe certain novel dynamics in the fake news phenomenon.

Firstly, the hyperconnectivity brought about by the popularity of social media means that online content of any kind can spread on an unprecedented rapid scale. Combined with the apparent growing user reliance on social media as a news source – in particular amongst young people – this creates a vulnerability where false stories can easily propagate.

They might then take hold if users conduct themselves online in a ‘filter bubble’ in which they surround themselves with only similar viewpoints and are not exposed to alternative or conflicting versions of the ‘truth’. These filter bubbles are in turn reinforced by social media platforms’ own algorithmic processes as users are presented with personalised content that complements what they have already looked at and liked and are less likely to be shown counter-content.

User behaviour and the nature of social media thereby appear to provide fertile ground for the spread of fake news. A further key concern is that this vulnerability can be exploited so that false content is propagated in an organised way for the purposes of profit (gained via online advertising) or political interference.

Inevitably questions arise over how fake news can be addressed, with much attention – including from the UK government – focusing on the suggestion that social media companies should take more responsibility for resolving the problem. Research studies, including our UnBias project, explore how changes to the regulation of platforms might prevent or limit spread of fake news. One of the most radical changes could involve a shift in the legal status of social media organisations so that they become more comparable to traditional publishers such as newspapers in terms of the responsibility they must take for content posted. Less radical, and perhaps more technically and politically likely, is the development of Codes of Conduct for social media platforms. Platforms could sign up to undertake various practices in response to potential fake news. This would not necessarily involve the removal of content – something which would lead to strong objections on the grounds of freedom of speech.

Other practices might include the use of ‘kite marks’ to display the trustworthiness of certain news stories (based on features such as the provenance of the story and the existence of counter stories), feedback functions through which users can vote on the likely truthfulness or otherwise of what they have read, or the use of algorithms designed to pierce filter bubbles via the presentation of alternative content. However as the fake news phenomenon is not simply a technology-based one but is also grounded in social practices, solutions to the problem may also need to look beyond changes to the regulation of platforms.

Particularly important might be education and user self-governance practices in which individuals identify potentially false content and act to stop themselves and others spreading it. Such practices can also help mitigate the spread of false information and also develop more critical faculties in consumers, particularly the young who may often accept news online as the truth. Public and political debates about fake news seem set to continue in the future and efforts to address the apparent problem will benefit from careful research scrutiny.
IRELAND COULD SUFFER most from Brexit – Northern Ireland more than other parts of the UK, the Irish Republic more than the rest of the European Union. The issues crystallise in the question of borders. In the North a clear 56% majority, including about a third of unionists, voted Remain, and very few people even among pro-Brexit voters want a ‘hard’ border between the North and South. But few believe British promises about a ‘soft’ electronic border. The Brexit imperative of ‘stopping immigration’ demands a hard border, as does an EU external frontier, and the real question is where?

A paradise for smugglers and paramilitaries

Based partly on medieval ownership patterns, the land border meanders around for over 300 miles through towns, hinterlands, local communities, farms and occasionally houses. Even when highly militarised in the Troubles, with 200 cross-border roads closed, it leaked like a sieve. So, irrespective of what happens in Ireland, the actual hard border for ‘stopping immigration’ will be the sea around Britain and its seaports and airports connecting with Ireland and the continent (though an independent Scotland within the EU would require additional measures). Similarly, the border for freight should be at ports and airports. They already have secure infrastructures for handling goods, whereas a supposedly hard land border would in reality be a smuggler’s paradise.

Attempting to harden it would sever the free trade between North and South, their cross-border production and supply chains, and substantially integrated but fragile economies. It would delay freight movements, clog up border roads, and disrupt travel for 30,000 cross-border commuters and all the other thousands who live their lives on both sides or cross occasionally to socialise, shop or use shared services. Politically it would provoke mass protests and civil disobedience. More ominously, it would undermine a ‘peace process’ explicitly based on cross-border institutions and minimising the border, and only paramilitaries would benefit. Building customs facilities along the border would be an open invitation for the ‘dissident republicans’ to copy the IRA’s 1950’s Border Campaign attacking border posts and personnel. That could boost their presently small numbers, in turn boost opposing unionist paramilitaries and conceivably re-ignite at least a mini-version of the Troubles.

Obstacles and omens

Avoiding the smuggler and paramilitary paradise won’t be easy. Mrs May’s priorities lie elsewhere; the administrations in Belfast, Dublin and London are currently in flux. The North’s largest unionist party, the DUP, is pro-Brexit and out-of-step with the 56% Remain majority; and there has always been a sizeable fringe of extremely nationalistic right-wing unionists who prefer nostalgic fantasies of British sovereignty to actually dealing with economic and social problems.

However, there are some good omens for retaining island-wide free trade and avoiding a hard land border. The EU wants to solve this issue before the trade talks with Britain (which could of course fail). It has poured millions into the cross-border ‘peace process’, and Ireland has already pioneered hybrid border-crossing institutions to deal with practical problems of conventional sovereignty.
Demands for Northern Ireland to have ‘special EU status’ – eg, in the European Economic Area like Norway and Iceland, or, the deluxe model, staying in the Single Market – are shorthand for some necessarily wider UK-EU arrangement. To avoid a hard land border, it has to encompass the customs arrangements not only with ‘the rest of the UK’, (ie, Britain, with or without Scotland), but also with ‘the rest of the (continental) EU’, and with ‘the rest of the world’. It has to involve all the island’s borders, and being an island helps.

A hybrid solution with shared management

This could safeguard all-island free trade, the South’s crucial access to markets in Britain, and the North’s to continental markets. Ireland could go from potentially suffering most from Brexit to being comparatively advantaged. It could simultaneously be in a free-trade zone with Britain, and in one with the continental EU. These larger zones would overlap in Ireland but would otherwise be completely separated from each other by the hard borders which Britain and the continental EU want for themselves. In effect the island would be an ‘intermediate’ space located within the hard borders separating Britain from the EU.

Princeton Professor Philip Pettit has detailed a ‘shared-space’ model of how the entry and exit customs regulations might work. These are always complicated, especially for people and goods which originate ‘elsewhere’, but to summarise his main points: regulations stay the same as at present for the entry of people and goods to the island from the continental EU and from Britain; exit to the continent and Britain would also follow the existing rules of free-movement for people and goods originating in Ireland; but not for those originating outside Ireland. For example, non-Irish EU citizens travelling from Ireland can be denied entry to Britain; and non-Irish goods – for example, cheap US hormone-saturated beef imported into the UK, which contravenes EU health standards – can be denied entry to the continent.

This model’s great strength is that much remains the same, but this is also a weakness. Pettit sees the customs authorities in the North and the South mostly operating as presently for things entering and exiting their part of the island, but there is no acknowledgement that their ‘shared-space’ needs shared or joint management (even if it annoys unionism’s right-wing nationalistic fringe). And Ireland already has the basic institutional infrastructures (eg, a North-South Ministerial Council and a British-Irish Council) for shared management democratically accountable to both political jurisdictions, North and South. This is absolutely essential, especially as trade patterns will change in new and threatening ways and Ireland’s border management must be able to respond. Take the dreaded US hormoned-beef: Britain might import it, but both electorates might want to stop it entering Ireland.

Smart politics?

The reasons for avoiding a hard land border are compelling and solutions are available, but popular pressure is needed. The UK may not owe Britain any favours but it certainly owes the vulnerable Irish Republic, ‘EU loyal’ to a fault. Northern Ireland, likewise vulnerable, will have a major concentration of EU/Irish citizens living outside the EU who can demand to be heard. If the EU is politically smart – always a question – it will reward its supporters (including Scotland where 62% opposed Brexit, though its situation is very different from Ireland’s). And if Irish nationalists are smart – sometimes another big ‘if’ – they will not confuse the challenge of stopping a hard border with the perennial demand for a ‘border poll’ on politically re-uniting Ireland. A reckless Brexit might ultimately lead to that, maybe even to a federal Ireland in a confederation with Scotland and both in the EU. But this is to run far ahead of reality. Arguably a border poll will not produce majorities for a united Ireland, especially in the present uncertainties of Brexit. It’s a divisive distraction from the immediate task of stopping a hard border. That needs the active support of at least a minority of unionists along with nationalists and others.

Please note that this article was written in April, before the UK General Election.

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Does the UK have to pay the EU more money?

One of the main sticking points in the negotiations will be the amount of money the UK has to settle with the EU because of the financial commitments already undertaken by the UK as a member of the EU. Many numbers are floating around, but the actual sum is still unclear as the extent of the UK’s liabilities is controversial and there are differing legal opinions on the matter. The two sides will agree on a methodology before entering into detailed discussions.
day Harold Wilson: personally uncommitted to Britain’s participation in European integration, but intellectually comprehending that Britain needs to be as close as possible to European centres of influence.

**Obstacles to overcome**

But there are many obstacles to this. Labour’s election manifesto, while emollient in tone towards the EU, and emphasising the protection of workers’ rights, promised only to retain the benefits of the single market and the customs union and accepted that free movement will end. Labour could, therefore, prove just as unwilling to address the probable costs of Brexit as the Conservatives have been thus far.

Much depends on what Conservative MPs now do, and they are in a bind. Many will want May to resign, but that would make it more difficult for the Conservatives now to form a government. They will not want a Labour minority government, with Corbyn as Prime Minister; and if they can avoid a second general election, they would probably prefer it.

May is now seeking to form a government with the Democratic Unionist Party, in which case, the existing politics of Brexit – emphasis on immigration control and the end of single market membership – are likely to continue, and could be exacerbated. At the same time, May’s authority has been crushed, and she is unlikely, therefore, to have any credibility with the EU, or room for manoeuvre in negotiations.

The fact that May could yet prove unable to pass the Great Repeal Bill through Parliament will not strengthen her hand in Brussels. UKIP has been stamped out, but there is no guarantee its decline will be terminal – especially if Brexit does not now go ahead as planned. And the SNP, one of the obstacles in May’s Brexit politics, has been weakened. The prospect of a second independence referendum, which did hold a big question mark over the wisdom of May’s Brexit stance, has now receded.

And of course, there is the EU. Indications are that the EU want Britain to get on with Brexit. They initially hoped for a change in heart, but now, they seem to have accepted Britain’s departure from the single market. Some have termed the referendum a spat in the Conservative Party that got out of hand, and Guy Verhofstadt, the European Parliament’s representative for the negotiations, has called the election another Conservative “own goal”. European Council President Donald Tusk pointed out that the Article 50 clock is still ticking.

Britain’s diplomacy with the EU, and the politics of Brexit, can change, but it will take a serious and sustained transformation of tone and direction from the British. Without that, and if there is a prolonged period of a weak May government or a long uncertain crisis, the chances of crashing out of the EU without a deal, or the chances of an ongoing stasis with no evident resolution, are heightened.

By Dr Helen Parr, senior lecturer at Keele University. This piece originally featured in The Conversation and the UK in a Changing Europe website. www.ukandeu.com
LINKING DATA OFFERS endless opportunities to research areas of interest that may not have been previously possible. Government departments and agencies hold large amounts of data on the population, collected during their day-to-day activities, routinely gathering information which can include social security payment records, educational attainment records, health records, court records, and tax records. Linking together these multiple sources of existing data that relate to a particular individual, a geographical location or an event, brings a new dimension to research.

Data linkage is a way of harnessing this valuable resource by intelligently combining anonymised data for research. Researchers use existing collections of extensive data that have been routinely collected and stored securely to identify patterns across entire populations, to give a much broader picture and an in-depth and accurate picture of society. Previously unnoticed relationships can be identified, giving greater depth of clarity and understanding that wouldn’t otherwise be possible from analysis using a single source of data alone.

Fuel Poverty Health Data Linking report

New research in Wales which uses secure, anonymous data from the Department of Work and Pensions, from the NHS, as well as a range of other data, shows the significant impacts and public benefits of data linkage research.

The research project is supported jointly by the ESRC and the Welsh Government. The overall aim is to use linked datasets accessed via the Administrative Data Research Centre Wales (ADRC-W) to evaluate the health and broader wellbeing impacts of Welsh Government-funded schemes to improve energy efficiency in the homes of low-income households.

The report, published in the Fuel Poverty Health Data Linking report, presents initial findings of an analysis of administrative data for the Welsh Government Warm Homes Nest Scheme. The administrative data was anonymously and securely linked to routine health records to examine the health service use of recipients of home energy efficiency measures.

The results of the study show a significant positive effect on respiratory health for recipients of Warm Homes Nest measures.

The research found that for people with a recorded GP event for respiratory illness, the average number of events fell by almost 4% for those who had benefited from Nest improvements, while they rose by almost 10% in the control group over the same period.
A similar pattern was found in asthma events, with a 6.5% decrease in the recipient group and a 12.5% increase in the control group for the same period.

**Research findings inform government policy**

These research findings help the Welsh Government understand the impact of energy efficiency and fuel poverty schemes on people’s health. The emerging research findings have been used in the development of the new Warm Homes Nest scheme and as a result, eligibility for a package of free home energy efficiency measures will be extended to low-income homes with members suffering from respiratory and circulatory conditions.

The research project is a collaboration between the Administrative Data Research Centre Wales (ADRC-W), the Farr Institute of Health Informatics Research, and the Welsh Government. The ADRC-W is led by Swansea University in partnership with Cardiff University.

Improved targeting of Welsh Government energy efficiency and fuel poverty schemes will help reduce the numbers of people living in fuel poverty and thus improve the health and wellbeing of significant numbers of people living in Wales.

**The Administrative Data Research Centre Wales (ADRC-W)**

ADRC-W is one of four UK centres that along with the Administrative Data Service make up the Administrative Data Research Network (ADRN), a UK-wide partnership between universities, government departments and agencies, national statistics authorities, funders and researchers. It is funded by the ESRC.

Together the four Centres provide a safe, secure and transparent data linkage service for accredited, approved research using de-identified UK administrative data. The ADRC-W is led by Professor David Ford at Swansea University. He said: “ADRC-W, as part of the UK-wide ADRN, is starting to play a major role in helping government, both local and national, develop effective policies and initiatives in Wales. It has been a delight to experience the enthusiastic participation of Welsh Government in these studies, and the openness to what is a significant change to the way policy has traditionally been made and evaluated”

The ADRC-W brings together a strong team of economic and social science researchers from across Wales, and leading data scientists with strengths in privacy protection, information governance and data technology platforms.

As the Fuel Poverty report shows, the ADRC-W is the focal point for data-related social research in Wales and a major player in UK-wide efforts to transform research and policy environments. ADRC-W builds on existing expertise and an acknowledged reputation for the safe and trustworthy use of complex social data to create a Centre that uses cutting-edge technology to efficiently link and analyse de-identified administrative data.

**New insights to social challenges**

Linked administrative data has the potential to provide insight into public issues, and evidence for policymakers to tackle a range of complex social, economic, environmental and health issues.

Instead of having many fragments of information scattered across the various agencies involved in providing public services, linked data collections create a broad picture across society, giving us far greater understanding.

By using these new data resources, researchers can better characterise and understand segments of our society that need help, and these insights can often overturn established views on how to tackle social problems.

In-depth research over a large geographical area, with large sample sizes means greater accuracy – and the potential for highly informed government policy.

Data linkage opens up endless possibilities to uncover new vital areas of research not previously possible. The power of using administrative data to provide evidence around challenging social questions can be seen in the current research and has huge potential to benefit society.
TRADE PARTNERS

In 2016, nearly 50% of all UK exports of goods went to just 6 countries: the US, Germany, France, Netherlands, Republic of Ireland and China. The US is our biggest export partner, receiving 15.7% of all UK exported goods. *An estimated 50 per cent of all goods exports to the Netherlands were re-exported to non-EU countries.

TRADE DEFICIT

£2.3 billion

The UK’s total trade deficit (goods and services) widened by £2.3 billion between February and March 2017 to £4.9 billion, contributing nearly half of the quarterly deficit.

Gross Domestic Product (GDP)

UK gross domestic product (GDP) was estimated to have increased by 0.3% in Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) 2017, the slowest rate of growth since Quarter 1 2016.

Slower growth in Quarter 1 2017 was mainly due to services, which grew by 0.3% compared with growth of 0.8% in Quarter 4 (Oct to Dec) 2016.

Production, construction and agriculture grew by 0.3%, 0.2% and 0.3% respectively in Quarter 1 2017.

In Quarter 1 2017 there were falls in several important consumer-focused industries, such as retail sales and accommodation; this was due in part to prices increasing more than spending.

GDP per head was estimated to have increased by 0.1% during Quarter 1 2017.
SERVICES

Index of services by selected components and total services (index, Feb 14 = 100)

RETAIL SECTOR

The 3 months to March shows a decrease in retail sales of 1.4%; the third consecutive decrease for the underlying 3 month on 3 month pattern.

Looking at the quarterly movement, the 3 months to March 2017 (Quarter 1) is the first quarterly decline since 2013 (Quarter 4).

In March 2017, the quantity bought in the retail industry is estimated to have increased by 1.7% compared with March 2016 and decreased by 1.8% compared with February 2017; decreases are seen across the four main store types.

Online sales (excluding automotive fuel) increased year-on-year by 19.5% and by 0.5% on the month, accounting for approximately 15.5% of all retail spending.

WHAT DO SERVICES INCLUDE?

Agricultural, forestry and fishing
Mining and oil and gas extraction services
Waste treatment and depollution
Manufacturing services on goods owned by others
Maintenance and repair services
Construction in the UK
Construction outside the UK
Architectural services
Engineering services
Scientific and other technical services including surveying
Operational leasing services

WHAT DO SERVICES INCLUDE?

Average store prices (including fuel) increased by 3.3% on the year, the largest growth since March 2012; the largest contribution came from petrol stations, where year-on-year average prices rose by 16.4%.

£35,760 MILLION

Total UK imports of services from Europe experienced the largest increase in 2015, rising from £29,085 million in 2014 to £31,483 million, an increase of 8.2%.

£123,231 million

(excluding travel, transport and banking) in current prices continued to rise in 2015, increasing from £119,703 million in 2014 to £123,231 million, an increase of 2.9%.

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Despite being held under the auspices of the ESRC’s UK in a Changing Europe initiative, the debate was not about Europe. Instead, the focus was on the role of experts and expert knowledge. Gove had, after all, said during the Brexit campaign that people were fed up of experts from organisations with acronyms that suggest they know what’s best, but who in fact get it consistently wrong. First in the firing line have been the election polling experts and their flawed forecasts of the UK and US elections of 2015 and 2016.

Portes began the discussion by pointing out that even apparently objective, hard-science issues such as climate change can be controversial. But the real issues arise in the social sciences, and especially economics. As he sees it, experts here have three main roles. The first is to explain their findings in clear English. He chose an example from his six years as chief economist at the Department of Work and Pensions. One of his tasks there was to debunk the “lumps of labour” fallacy, which holds that there is a fixed amount of work to do in the economy. In fact, the whole economy grows if there are more workers, for example through immigration, or if more women do paid work.

The second role Portes sees for experts is what he terms “calling out bullshit”. He cited a report on the possible benefit to Brexit Britain of free trade deals with nations around the world. The report, widely noted in the Eurosceptic press, factored in the jobs that might be gained by increased exports, but not those lost by increased imports from the same places.

Alongside this task of “intellectual garbage disposal,” Portes called for experts to take on a third task of pointing up issues, such as the minimum wage, on which there are no clear academic answers. Like other politicians, he said, Gove is happy to cite experts whose conclusions suit his message while remaining sceptical about those who disagree with him. But experts themselves need to do better at explaining their findings. For example, they need to make it clear that economic forecasts are advice intended to help current policy, not factual predictions of the future.

**Why have a democracy?**

Michael Gove began his riposte by “shooting some fish in a barrel,” with a long list of failed economic forecasts from bodies such as the Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England, the IMF, the OECD and the Confederation of British Industry (CBI). All had been pessimistic about Brexit, and some had later had to change their minds publicly. Some had committed what Gove plainly regards as an even bigger crime, supporting the Euro, so providing intellectual backup for the calamity that later overwhelmed Greece and other Eurozone members.
Gove's conclusion was that it is wrong to use the reported opinion of any organisation, however prestigious, as a way of closing down an argument. The hard sciences work by means of evidence and experiment, and this explains their success. By contrast, thinks Gove, the social sciences are subject to chronic groupthink and error. Some insiders obviously agree with him. He praised current attempts to drag the social sciences out of their comfort zone, such as the Heterodox Academy in the US. Its aim is to counteract the centre-left mindset of much American academic thinking. As Gove sees it, "the dissentive voice is necessary for mankind to advance." And as he said: "If you are going to leave it to the experts, why have a democracy?" The track record of putting experts in charge of policy, without the external brake of democratic opinion, is in his view a miserable one.

In discussion, the two speakers decided that red onions were the case study they needed to make their point. For Portes, economics has now got to the point where it can predict how much sales will fall if the price of red onions is doubled in the shops. It can even foretell how far sales of other onions will rise at the same time. But for Gove, things are not quite that simple. If red onions are seen as more chic when they cost more, sales might go up. And as he said, people have an "economic identity" which leads them to do things economics might have trouble understanding, such as buying British goods in favour of cheaper foreign ones.

Gove added that the complexities of onion economics stress the importance of debating complex issues with a wide range of experts. Two stars of his own political firmament, former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and her Chancellor of the Exchequer, Nigel Lawson, loved debating, he said, and this enthusiasm led them to make better decisions. Portes agreed, but added that the pressure of contemporary politics now makes this active engagement harder for politicians to manage.

In the audience question and answer, both speakers were asked just what difference contemporary technology makes to these issues. We now have all the world's knowledge literally at our fingertips, and Portes welcomes the instant fact-checking and debate that it allows. However, social media also allow people to avoid any opinions they do not agree with. This expands the scope for confirmation bias, said Gove. He added that old-fashioned printed newspapers are at least part of the answer to escaping monocultural information silos.

Despite chair Julia Hartley-Brewer's attempt to avoid restaging the Brexit debate, the issue is one that will not go away for anyone discussing rival views of the UK economy. Gove was especially dismissive of the CBI, a strong Remain supporter, asking where it got its money and how it ensured that it was representing the views of UK companies. He also pointed out that another economic think tank, the National Institute of Economic and Social Research, had published a report downplaying the possible effects of Brexit which received far less attention than some starker warnings of the outlook. At the same time, Portes and Gove agreed that it is important to treat some pronouncements from apparently neutral economics thinktanks with care. While they may hire clever economists, some are run by politicians with their own agenda. Gove cited the IMF, run by French politician Christine Lagarde, as a prime case in point.

"As Gove sees it, the dissentive voice is necessary for mankind to advance."
Louise Arseneault arrived at what is now the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience at King’s College London nearly 20 years ago, from her native Quebec. Then a postdoctoral researcher, she is now professor of Developmental Psychology. And she has a new challenge, this time from ESRC. She is our first Mental Health Champion, charged with making mental health central to the ESRC’s vision, strategies and funding decisions.

Arseneault sees the post as part of a wider trend within society to take mental health issues more seriously. She says: “I am optimistic, because five years ago, an appointment like this one would have been far more challenging, and it was nearly impossible to raise awareness about mental health issues. Now there is more willingness to see mental illness as common, and as part of everyday life. I work with clinicians, charities and people in government in a way I never used to before. We need more work to tackle the stigma attached to considering mental health problems. I hope research will continue to contribute to this change.”

She wants her new position to provide “intellectual input to shape the mental health research portfolio at the ESRC.” This will involve “advice on funding more mental health research.” As champion for mental health in a social science organisation, she sees an opportunity to go beyond the “genes and biology” approach to mental health, and to emphasise the social and environmental aspects of mental health problems. And while the appointment is only for three years, she regards it as an opportunity to catalyse long-lasting change in research council thinking on mental health issues.

Arseneault sees the potential for more ESRC projects on mental health, but is opposed to the subject becoming another intellectual silo. Instead, she would like other projects in the economic and social sciences to include mental health in their thinking. “I am keen to increase the scientific community’s awareness of mental health in planning their research,” she says.

Nor does Arseneault confine her interest to the ESRC’s subject area. There is every reason, she thinks, why research councils devoted to the physical sciences and engineering could develop better tools to assess the symptoms of mental wellness and illness, or to help people with mental health problems. She says: “I’d like us to step out of our comfort zones and work with other disciplines and other funders, to create new cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary projects on mental health.”

Budgets under pressure

But Arseneault admits that she may have accepted this new project at a tricky time. Budgets for the National Health Service, social care and mental health research are under pressure, making it more difficult to support the big expansion in spending that she might like to see. “More money will be needed to tackle mental health problems in society today,” she concedes. But on a positive note, she sees that government is more interested than in the past in evidence-based strategies. For her, supporting mental health services, and developing prevention strategies, are cost-effective approaches to improving society.

Allied to this issue is our growing awareness of the ageing population, and its sweeping social and economic impact. Arseneault sees this concern as a deep one that can only be solved over decades. As she says: “It is important to consider mental health when we think about the years of health and wealth...
that we want older people to enjoy. We need to start planning these years in early life, because we are aware that older people are affected by choices they made while young. We know that the early years have an effect on mental health, even at a great distance in time.” This raises the possibility of identifying groups whose later years can be improved by action taken during their youth or even childhood. “We are now getting the research tools to do this,” says Arseneault. “The UK has some of the best data in this area. Research here could lead to significant advances in understanding the ageing process.”

This concern with the long-lasting effects of childhood events reflects her own research achievements, based on several long-term cohort studies which are central to her work. With funding from the Medical Research Council, she is now principal investigator on the cohort which she originally worked on when she arrived in the UK in the 1990s, the Environmental Risk (E-Risk) Longitudinal Twin Study.

She says: “Cohort studies are a very powerful tool for observing the lifespan and getting insights into human development, including mental health and mental illness.” Asked for a favourite finding from this research, she volunteers two.

The first relates to two of her long-term research interests: the causes of school bullying, a stressful and damaging experience for many children, and the use of twin data to analyse the origins of the problem. Arseneault explains: “Our cohort study includes genetically identical twins who were brought up the same household, and we focused specifically on twin pairs where one twin had been bullied while the other had not. Our findings indicated that those twins who were bullied had higher levels of emotional problems a few years later than their genetically identical twin who was not bullied.” This supports the idea that being a victim of bullying led to mental health problems, including symptoms of anxiety and depression, over and above genetic and environmental influences.

Her second and related finding draws on the National Child Development Study, the 1958 British Birth Cohort. It revealed that the experience of being bullied at school in childhood affected people’s mental and physical health, and their socio-economic outlook, all the way into middle age. She points out: “Nobody had realised the profound impact being bullied in childhood could have, and we tested this with an amazing data resource we have here in the UK.”

The outreach of this study was important in its own right and in Arseneault’s intellectual development. She says: “When the paper came out in a very impactful psychiatry journal, it received a lot of attention from the media and our findings were reported on the radio and in the newspaper. That afternoon, I started to receive lots of emails from people saying, ‘your study describes my experience with bullying, my life’. That was when I realised that research can reach people and can generate public interest.”

Among the research that grew out of this success was in interest in transitions, such as school changes or the shift from school to work. It shows that these transitions are key life events, which as she says “can be positive or negative, but can certainly be stressful.” Such transitions are also a point at which mental health problems can emerge or reappear. For example, bullying can stop for some individuals during the change from primary to secondary school. But Arseneault adds that “some of this negative experience can transition too.”

Arseneault herself undoubtedly has an existence which involves its own stresses and pressures. But she balances it by spending time in very different conditions in Africa. She explains: “In 2011 I went to a game reserve in Zambia for a three-month sabbatical, at a beautiful safari lodge with fascinating wildlife and wonderful people. It was the experience of a lifetime. I then carried on going there as a volunteer each year, and although my life is too busy now to volunteer for long periods, I intend to visit regularly for shorter lengths of time.” She adds: “I’d encourage anyone to do something like this. Instead of making what I do professionally seem unimportant, it helped me to realise the significance of everything I do in the UK and just how much I enjoy it.”

Now there is more willingness to see mental illness as common, and as part of everyday life
IN MARCH, THE ESRC, in partnership with SAGE Publishing, announced the winners of its 2016/17 writing competition ‘Making Sense of Society’ at an awards ceremony that took place at the Royal Society in London.

Students Wilhelmiina Toivo, from the University of Glasgow and Lauren White, from the University of Sheffield were crowned joint winners, each receiving a £1,000 prize. The two runners-up, Max Gallien, London School of Economics and Elo Luik, University of Oxford, were awarded £500.

The competition, which is now in its second year, celebrates and fosters the writing skills of the next generation of social scientists. This year students were asked to write 800 words about why their research matters, and how it helps us make sense of and understand the society in which we live. There were nearly 300 entries demonstrating the breadth and depth of social science research taking place across the UK. Topics ranged from Big Data, to climate change, class, immigration, dementia, the economy and education.

Entrants were encouraged to temporarily take off their academic hat, and write in a style different to what they might be used to, using their imagination to think of new ways to capture the interest of the public.

Entries were judged by a panel of science communication experts. They included Martin Rosenbaum, member of the ESRC Council and an executive producer in the BBC Political Programmes department; Martin Ince, President of the Association of British Science Writers; Miranda Nunhofer, Executive Director at SAGE Publishing; and Tash Reith-Banks, Production Editor for the Guardian’s Science desk. Here we take a look at the two winning entries.

**Once more, with feeling: life as bilingual:**
Wilhelmiina Toivo, University of Glasgow

My dad had a rather liberal philosophy of bringing up children, but he would always tell us off for swearing. As a result, I grew up feeling very uncomfortable using swearwords. Or, at least, so I thought – when I first moved to Scotland, I noticed that it was actually very easy to swear in English. Interestingly enough, I also found it easy to talk to my flatmates about topics that felt too intimate to discuss in my native tongue. In a flat of seven girls from all over Europe, we discussed the full magnitude of emotions and topics; the fears of living abroad, falling in and out of love, death, sex – everything. Swearing and talking about these emotions was not easy just because of the inherent rowdiness of the student community, or because we felt liberated being away from home for the first time. The effect I was observing is something that goes deeper and touches a huge number of people who live in multilingual settings.

Many bilinguals report ‘feeling less’ in their second language; it does not bear the same emotional weight as your native language. Feeling less emotionally connected to your second language might make it easier to use highly emotional vocabulary, which is precisely what I was experiencing with my ease of swearing and talking about sensitive topics in English. The scientific term for this is ‘reduced emotional resonance of language’. It is a fairly well-established phenomenon, but many specific questions still remain unanswered. For example, what exactly makes one’s second language less emotional? How does this affect different immigrant communities? My research project aims to address these questions by looking into the reasons and implications of reduced emotional resonance in bilinguals’ second language.

It is still unclear what exactly shapes emotional resonance of a language and in what way – results thus far have been inconclusive. In the first part of my project we are exploring which factors in a person’s language background contribute to reduced
emotional resonance. For example, is it influenced by the age at which you have learnt your second language? Does it matter how frequently and in which context you use the language? Or is your emotional experience of a language predictable from whether you dream or can do maths in it?

To investigate these questions, my project uses eye-tracker technology to measure bilinguals’ pupil responses to emotional words in English. Typically, when shown highly emotional words or pictures, people’s pupils dilate as an uncontrollable, emotional reaction. Previous research has shown the effect is smaller in bilinguals’ second language, which suggests reduced emotional resonance. Understanding the reasons why this happens can, in turn, help us explain how you experience a foreign language community, and how this could be taken into account in acculturation and adaptation.

Wittgenstein said: “The limits of my language are the limits of my world.” This is particularly true for your second language. For fluent bilinguals living in a community where their native language is not spoken, reduced emotional resonance sets ‘the limits of the world’. While your language skills can be more than adequate, not being able to fully structure your surroundings through language might leave you feeling alienated; not a part of the society you live in. Or perhaps you are perceived as rude or socially awkward for using the wrong words in the wrong emotional context.

However, not all the implications of reduced emotional resonance are negative – bilinguals can actually benefit from being able to approach things in a less emotionally involved way. For example, bilinguals have been shown to be able to make more rational decisions in their second language. Also, switching languages can be used as a tool in therapy when working through emotionally difficult or traumatising experiences. Imagine how it would be if it were easier to talk about your emotions with your partner – maybe bilingual couples have a communicative advantage?

Ultimately, understanding the full scale of implications of reduced emotional resonance is a way to understand how bilinguals experience the world. In the increasingly globalising world where studying abroad, immigration and sojourning are more and more common, as well as pervasive issues in international politics, understanding the realities of bi- and multilingual people is crucial. Being bilingual no longer means just being exposed to two languages from birth – it can refer to a person who uses two languages in their everyday life, regardless of their level of fluency. As the number of people with versatile language backgrounds grows, understanding all aspects of language and how these mediate our lives become important. Language is so much more than just a communication device; it is a way to understand the world around us, defining our reality and what it actually means to be human.

Living and looking for lavatories: Lauren White, University of Sheffield

It may be a turn of the stomach, a nervous flutter, a morning coffee or a sudden, unpredictable rush. You may look for a sign, if you are lucky enough to live in a society where they are readily available.

There may or may not be a queue, often depending on the room of your gender. You may look for disabled access, whether you are in a wheelchair or whether you have an invisible illness. You may select a space based on who is there or your perception of the cleanliness. For some, it
is an unwritten rule that one cannot go next to another person relieving themselves. What are you looking for?
A lavatory.

Also known as a toilet, bog, ladies, gents, pisspot, restroom, dunny, convenience, powder room, and the WC, to name a few.

Toilets are mundane, an everyday space, a common fixture in the home and the workplace, a thing that we all use, in a diversity of ways. Toilets have historically been (and continue to be) shaped by our cultures, gender, social class and ethnicity with clear boundaries, distinctions and divisions imposed. This, in turn, shapes our social identities.

Toilets are a personal thing; a private side of life that is rarely discussed, or if we do disclose our habits or toilet trips we do so with hesitation, euphemisms or a nervous giggle. However, toilets are a very public issue. They are in department stores, coffee shops, pubs, restaurants and on trains. There is a declining number of public toilets, now often vandalised and abandoned, perceived as unhygienic, or a place of illegal activity and other ‘hazards’.

Toilets are a source of interaction, of social structures, organisation, norms and values. So why aren’t sociologists discussing them more?

I have a bowel problem. I live with an unpredictable bowel, one that changes every day; from abdominal pain to bloating and urgency to find a toilet. Bowel conditions are not socially accepted and discussed conditions, a disclosure often thought as ‘too much information’. The anxiety of the symptoms and the need to use toilets led me to toilet mapping; making mental notes of the nearest toilets, and the quickest way to get to them. Toilets became not just a functional space, but also a place of safety and relief, in more than one sense.

I am not alone. There are a variety of conditions for which knowledge of toilet locations is crucial for managing symptoms – conditions such as bladder incontinence, inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) and irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), for example. My PhD research is focusing on the common condition of IBS. According to NHS Choices, 20 per cent of the UK population lives with IBS – arguably more, given the concealment of the condition. Despite this, bowel conditions and the symptoms of constipation, diarrhoea, flatulence, (in)continence and other activities that take place in the ‘private’ realm of the toilets remain heavily taboo topics in contemporary western society.

My research explores the lived experience of managing symptoms of IBS, particularly in the spaces where symptoms are mostly managed: the bathroom.

My research examines how places such as toilets can be reflective of our practices of privacy and containment of our bodily excretions. We may divide ourselves and our relations to each other in such a way that makes life with conditions such as IBS incredibly isolating. This means that the coping strategies and challenges faced in the day-to-day life of people who live with these conditions are underappreciated, hidden and, crucially, misunderstood.

Some would argue that bathrooms and toilets are the backstage of social life. However, there are many performances still going on within the toilet cubicle: the holding on until another person has left the toilet, waiting until the hand dryer goes on or blaming the time spent in the toilet on a fictional queue. Whilst this may seem an obvious behaviour of privacy and dignity, the strategies of toilet mapping and negotiating toilet spaces to keep the IBS identity private questions the boundaries of society; the public and the private, the clean and the dirty, self and other.

In discussing my research, I often face a reception of pure horror, a nervous laugh or a joke, but very rarely an open, honest discussion of our own bowel habits and toilet behaviours. The awkwardness around the topic creates greater challenges for those living with bowel conditions, and reinforces stigma. Some may laugh at the fact I talk about poo and toilets in my academic life. There may be banter in the bowels, a joke that I need a colon in my future research papers or conference presentations. But is the difficulty of living with an unpredictable bowel in an unaccommodating society really that funny? It’s time to talk shit.
News briefs

NEW RESEARCH CENTRE TO INFORM UK HOUSING POLICY

ESRC, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation have announced the launch of the new UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence (CaCHE).

Housing has a considerable impact on our society and economy. Almost one in 10 British jobs are in the housing sector, and more than a fifth of household spending goes on rent, mortgage payments, home repairs, maintenance and improvements. The availability, cost and design of housing affects people’s aspirations, health and wellbeing, and even their children’s education. Failure of housing markets can lead to wider economic problems, as well as poverty and homelessness.

The new national research centre, which will be independent from government and other interests, is a collaboration between nine UK Universities and four non-HEI organisations and will have staff located at five hubs across the UK in Glasgow, Sheffield, London, Cardiff and Belfast. CaCHE will be led by the University of Glasgow. CaCHE will advance knowledge of the housing market, provide robust evidence to inform housing policy and practice across the UK, and will join together a comprehensive range of stakeholders with the goal of tackling housing problems at a national, devolved, regional, and local level.

The five-year centre will launch on 1 August 2017 and will receive £6 million of funding from the ESRC, with support from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the AHRC. A further £1.5 million of funding will come from the consortium itself.

The work of the centre will focus on six overlapping themes:

- Housing and the economy
- Understanding housing markets: demand and need, supply and delivery
- Housing aspirations, choices and outcomes
- Housing, poverty, health, education and employment
- Housing and neighbourhood design, sustainability and place-making
- Multi-level governance

Professor Jane Elliott, ESRC CEO said: “This Centre draws together internationally renowned experts across a diverse range of fields. It will serve as a vital national institution, and provide a leading voice in the UK on housing issues.”

£8.6 MILLION UK RESEARCH PROGRAMME ON GREENHOUSE GAS REMOVAL

The UK is committed to the 2015 Paris Agreement to keep global temperature rise well below 2°C and pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels. Researchers know there are ways to address the potential for greenhouse gas removal on a global scale.

The programme is jointly funded by the ESRC, the Natural Environment Research Council, the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. The Met Office and the Science and Technology Facilities Council are providing in-kind support.

Four interdisciplinary, multi-institute consortium and seven topic-specific projects have been awarded funding. Around 100 researchers from 40 UK universities and partner organisations will be involved, as well as seven research studentships, providing PhD training.

For more information see: gotw.nerc.ac.uk/list_them.asp?them=Greenhouse+Gas+Removal&cookieConsent=A

NEW BREXIT RESEARCH

The ESRC is funding 25 new research projects focusing on the process and consequences of the UK leaving the European Union.

The research covers a wide range of issues including the public’s Brexit preferences, the impact of Brexit on stability and peace in Northern Ireland, to its effect on trade, agriculture, migration, and the lives of expats and European families living in Britain. The projects range from nine to 18 months and are funded as part of the ESRC’s UK in a Changing Europe initiative.

Anand Menon, Professor of European Politics and Foreign Affairs at King’s College London and Director of the UK in a Changing Europe Initiative said: “These new additions will reinforce the ability of UK in a Changing Europe to respond to the high demand for accurate, research-based information from politicians, civil servants, journalists, businesses, civil society and the public at this crucial moment for the UK.”

For more information see: ukandeu.ac.uk
People

JANE ELLIOTT TO BECOME PROFESSOR OF SOCIOLOGY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF EXETER

Professor Jane Elliott, ESRC’s Chief Executive, is to leave the organisation after three years at ESRC, to take up the position of Professor of Sociology at the University of Exeter in September.

Before joining the ESRC, Professor Elliott was Professor of Sociology and Head of the Department of Quantitative Social Sciences, at the Institute of Education, University of London, as well as Director of the ESRC-funded Centre for Longitudinal Studies (CLS) which manages the 1958, 1970 and Millennium Birth Cohort studies together with the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (now known as Next Steps). In 2012 Jane became the founding Director of the Cohorts and Longitudinal Studies Enhancement Resources (CLOSER) programme.

ESRC Chair Dr Alan Gillespie said: “On behalf of ESRC, I would like to thank Jane for her invaluable leadership and contribution to the ESRC. Under her guidance the ESRC has remained focused on its priorities, funding research that has vital real-world impact, and positioned as the leading partner for economic and social science research both at home and throughout the world. We offer Jane many good wishes for the years ahead at the University of Exeter.”

The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has begun the process of recruiting Professor Elliott’s successor.

PHIL SOOBEN APPOINTED CEO OF THE POLITICAL STUDIES ASSOCIATION

One of the ESRC’s longest-serving senior members of staff, Phil Sooben, Director of Policy and Resources and Deputy Chief Executive, is leaving in June 2017 to take up the position of CEO at the Political Studies Association.

Phil said: “I have thoroughly enjoyed my time at the ESRC and it is with some regret and sadness that I will leave the organisation after more than 28 years. I have worked with so many enthusiastic and professional colleagues and fantastic friends, and it will be difficult to say goodbye – but this position is the perfect opportunity at the right time and I did not want to let it pass by.

It is a privilege to be moving to the Political Studies Association and I am looking forward to joining them in the summer.”

NEW ESRC COUNCIL MEMBERS

Jo Johnson, the Minister of State for Universities and Science, has appointed Professor Jane Falkingham, Professor Nigel Gilbert, Professor Melinda Mills, and Ms Susan Penwarden as ESRC Council members.

They join the ESRC at a crucial time as we work towards the successful creation of UK Research and Innovation. The Council is the senior decision-making body of the ESRC, and comprises individuals from business, civil society and the public sector as well as representatives from the academic community.

Jane Falkingham OBE is Professor of Demography and International Social Policy and Dean of the Faculty of Social, Human and Mathematical Sciences at the University of Southampton. She is also the Director of the ESRC Centre for Population Change, President of the British Society for Population Studies and Vice-President (President elect) of the European Association for Population Studies. And also a Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences and the Royal Society of Arts.

Nigel Gilbert CBE is a computational sociologist and Professor of Sociology at the University of Surrey. Nigel is Director of the ESRC-NERC Centre for the Evaluation of Complexity Across the Nexus and a member of the Defra Social Science Expert Panel. He was previously a Pro Vice-Chancellor at the University of Surrey. He is a Fellow of the Royal Academy of Engineering, a Chartered Engineer, and a Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences.

Melinda Mills is the Nuffield Professor of Sociology at Nuffield College and Head of the Department of Sociology at the University of Oxford. She is a specialist in the area of sociogenomics (combining social science and molecular genetics), life course research (fertility, partnerships, assortative mating). Melinda is an elected member of the European Academy of Sociology and has held faculty positions in the Netherlands (Amsterdam, Groningen) and Germany (Bielefeld). Melinda is the Editor-in-Chief of the European Sociological Review and publishes in both social and natural science journals.

Susan Penwarden joined Aviva in January 2013. Her current role is Director, General Insurance, Aviva France. Prior to joining Aviva Susan worked for RSA for 14 years. She held increasingly influential and global positions, moving from team leader to regional and then corporate executive level roles. Her last role at RSA was based in the UK as Group Speciality Portfolio Director.

DIRECTOR FOR UK HEALTH AND BIOMEDICAL INFORMATICS RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Professor Andrew Morris has been appointed Director of the new UK health and biomedical informatics research institute, which is to be named Health Data Research UK (HDR UK). The new institute will, for the first time in the world, incorporate on a national scale the whole breadth of data science research aimed at improving human health.

HDR UK is a joint investment led by the MRC, together with the health research departments of England, Scotland and Wales, the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, the ESRC, British Heart Foundation and Wellcome.

Harnessing the power of the NHS and associated health and biomedical data in the UK, HDR UK will develop and apply the cutting edge informatics approaches needed to address the most pressing health research challenges facing patients and the public.
Publications

Pathways to sustainable agriculture

This highlights some of the major findings from the STEPS Centre’s research on sustainable agriculture. It draws on four books, not previously available for open access, which address three themes central to understanding how pathways emerge in agriculture, and how sustainability is, or is not, generated. The three themes are: framing (how we understand agriculture and its roles in development), practice (how agriculture and agricultural research is carried out, and by whom) and governance (how agriculture is regulated and controlled).

Pathways to sustainable agriculture is a FreeBook free to download from the Routledge website For more information see: www.routledge.com/posts/11542

Young People in the Labour Market

This book focuses on young people and the ways in which their working lives have changed between the 1980s recession and the recession of 2008/2009 and its aftermath. Drawing on data originally collected during the 1980s recession and comparing it to contemporary data drawn from the UK Household Longitudinal Study, the book explores the ways in which young people have adjusted to the changes, beginning by drawing attention to trends already emerging in the preceding two decades.

Young People in the Labour Market by Andy Furlong, John Goodwin, Sarah Hadfield, Stuart Hall, Kevin Lowden, Henrietta O’Connor, Rêka Plugor. ISBN 9781138798069, (hardback), 176pp @ £30.00. For more information see: www.routledge.com

EVENTS

12 JULY

Health Studies User Conference 2017

The annual Health Studies User Conference, is organised by the UK Data Service in collaboration with NatCen Social Research. The conference will allow users to hear updates from the data producers on key UK cross-sectional health surveys and key UK longitudinal studies with health-related content. www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/health-studies-user-conference-2017-tickets-32916073863?aff=euscreeventpage4949

31 JULY 2017-4 AUGUST

Encounters with big data: An introduction to using big data in the social sciences

This course run by the UK Data Service will introduce key concepts and discussions around using big data in the social sciences, and introduce attendees to Apache Hadoop, an open source framework for analysing big data. This course will focus on quantitative data and will not cover in any detail text, social media, audio or other forms of non-numeric data. www.ukdataservice.ac.uk/news-and-events/eventsitem/?id=4998

1 AUGUST

Best practice in licensing and governance for research data

This course introduces best practices in licensing and governance models for research data. The focus is on practical and efficient ways to get data assets for research through the pipeline from data creator to user. Ethical and legal issues will be covered so far as they apply to data, with real life examples from data collections available via the UK Data Service. Email: booking@ukdataservice.ac.uk

14 SEPTEMBER

Liability v. innovation: unpacking key connections , Seminar 6

This seminar will examine the relationship between the regulation of research, and of innovative treatments and the effects on innovation. Issues to be addressed include the distinction between innovative treatment and research; the relative threat of tort law and regulation on innovation in research and whether the level of compensation to research subjects stifles innovation. www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/liability-v-innovation-unpacking-key-connections-tickets-32412280002
Making sense of society

The ESRC magazine Society Now aims to raise awareness of our research and its impact. It addresses a wide range of readers, from the MP to the businessperson, the voluntary worker to the teacher, the public through to the social scientist, and is published four times a year (spring, summer, autumn and winter).

Society Now offers a readable, intelligent, concise overview of current issues concerning society.

To subscribe to the magazine, please send an email including your full name and address to: societynow@esrc.ac.uk