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## European Studies and Public Engagement: A Conceptual Toolbox

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## Abstract

This article examines public engagement strategies for academics working in the field of European Studies. Should academics engage with the public? What are the most effective outreach strategies? And what are the implications for universities and departments? The article argues that engaging with the public should be considered an integral part for academics working on topics that relate to the European Union or European politics. The article has a theoretical and a practical dimension. The first part of the paper deals with the nature of public engagement, explaining why it is an important issue and how it differs from the mainstream understanding of public engagement. The practical part of the paper presents the idea of building an online presence through which academics can engage with the public debate both during periods of low issue salience and high issue salience. The final section includes a toolbox for academics as well as some thoughts on what universities and departments need to change in order to fulfil the public engagement function discussed in the first part of the paper.

## Keywords

Public engagement; European studies; impact; teaching; learning; teaching European studies

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Recent years have seen a dramatic change in public perception of EU topics. The economic crisis in Europe, debates about the future of the eurozone, the EU's relations with Ukraine and Russia, TTIP, ACTA and even institutional questions such as the role of the European Parliament in the election of a new European Commission president have become widely discussed topics. The role of academics in these debates remains a contested issue. There is a view that academics have the responsibility to inform and – to a certain extent – shape the public debate on these issues. Others claim that academics should focus on research and teaching and should stay away from the public discourse. However, two factors have had a major impact on this debate and have made it almost impossible to stick to the idea that academics should stay in their ivory towers. The first factor is the changing nature of higher education systems in the UK but also across Europe. Universities and individual academics are increasingly evaluated by the societal impact of their research output. While there are numerous problems with the concept of impact, universities have started showing the relevance of their research output by creating impact stories that involve various public engagement elements. Seen from that perspective, public engagement is often perceived as yet another burden on academics. Unfortunately, this is the result of a basic flaw within the rather static public engagement agenda put forward by governments and universities alike; it is their sincere belief that there is only one definition of public engagement and it is implicitly expected that each individual, each university, each department does exactly the same. But these arguments underestimate the diversity in academia, they do not consider what it means in terms of costs, risks, time and workload and they do not take into account differences between individuals and universities. The second factor that fundamentally changed the role of how academics can get involved in the public debate is the possibilities brought by digital outreach tools and strategies. The digital revolution has not only changed personal communication habits, it also fundamentally changed the nature of political debates. Building an online presence is one of the most important and promising outreach strategies for academics in this new environment. This article presents a few ideas on how to get started and how academics can use established platforms and tools to engage with the public debate. The article has a theoretical and a practical dimension. The first part of the paper deals with the question of

what is public engagement, why it is an important issue and how it differs from the mainstream understanding of public engagement. The second part provides a set of practical recommendations for researchers. Although the article should be seen as part of the higher education debate in the UK, many of the issues raised are relevant for researchers across Europe. However, the article is a reflection on the current developments in the UK higher education system and may be more relevant for scholars working in UK universities. It is also worth noting that the topic should resonate with social - and political scientists who do not have a research interest in European issues.

## WHAT IS PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT?

The definition of public engagement is closely linked to how we conceptualise the role of the university and its place within society. Is academia an end to itself or do scholars have a responsibility to serve the wider society? It is not the intention of this article to dive into this debate about the nature of academic research and scholarly traditions. However, fundamental questions about the role of scholars in the public arena are probably as old as the idea of universities and academic research themselves. Looking at the concept of public engagement we are faced with multiple overlapping debates and definitions that aim to answer two questions: What exactly is engagement? And who or what is the public?

Two main approaches inform the term engagement - notions of a scholarship of engagement and the idea of being a public intellectual. Both notions also define the way we can think about the "public". A starting point for the purpose of this article is the observation "that research that informs public deliberation and praxis is just as important as research that is of interest mainly to other academics" (Bridger et al 2011: 173). By acknowledging that the scholarly profession is partly linked to serving the public, we can establish that academics are by definition some sort of public providers of knowledge. This also corresponds with Ernest Boyer's paradigm of academic scholarship which he defines as a mixture of four "interlocking functions": a scholarship of discovery (research and knowledge production), a scholarship of integration (focus on context and interdisciplinary exchange), a scholarship of sharing knowledge (dissemination among peers and teaching) and the scholarship of engagement (service to the community) (Boyer 1996). The first three functions are linked to the more traditional way of looking at academia; the fourth function of engagement is adding an additional dimension to the definition of academia. Another consideration in this context is the nature of European Studies as an academic subject and its links to the wider social sciences. Thinking about the function of social science, Gerring and Yesnowitz observe that "social science is science for society's sake. These disciplines look to provide answers to questions of pressing concern, or questions that we think should be of pressing concern, to the general public" (Gerring and Yesnowitz 2006: p.112). Using this line of argumentation, it is not too difficult to establish why European studies is relevant to the general public. The effects and developments connected to European integration have become headline news across Europe. Issues connected to EU politics, the impact of EU policy, the future of the eurozone, phenomena such as euroscepticism or more institutional questions about the interaction of different institutions have become a constant feature of public discourse.

Defining engagement as a "service to the community" and "social science" as a "science for society" allows us to think about public engagement in a much broader sense. Engagement is always an individual choice and it is worth highlighting that, in fact, different activities can be labelled as engagement. Examples could include writing an op-ed for a national newspaper, editing *wikipedia*, writing a blog, advising community groups about how to work with the EU, visiting a local high school to explain EU politics, being part of an expert committee, a submission to a governmental report, a secondment posts in ministries, drafting a report for a think tank or a writing a book that aims at the non-academic market. This broader definition of (public) engagement can also resonate

with university departments as they can find an individual approach to engagement that creates a balance between institutional aims of the university and personal interests of academics.

Engagement in European Studies can also be justified by the current debate about the EU which often seems uniformed. A recent *Eurobarometer* survey found that Europeans have a severe lack of understanding when it comes to "knowledge about the EU": 47 % of European say they do not understand how the EU works. 46% of Europeans do not know or think it is "false" that members of the European Parliament are directly elected by citizens. (European Commission 2013). European Studies scholars across Europe are in a position to address this by subscribing to an agenda of public engagement.

The second set of concepts that spring to mind when looking at public engagement of academics is the idea of public intellectuals which relates more to the engagement in the public sphere and can be defined as a sub-category to the engagement argument presented above. Theoretically everyone can become a public intellectual, and over the years there have been numerous debates about the role of the so called public intellectuals. This article does not aim to replicate arguments on whether we need public intellectuals; it merely wants to point out that there is a long history of academics being present in the public debate. In order to look at the phenomenon from a more functional perspective, Lightman et al. (1999) define a public intellectual as someone who is "trained in a particular discipline (...) and who is on the faculty of a college or university. When such a person decides to write and speak to a larger audience than their professional colleagues, he or she becomes a "public intellectual" (Lightman et al. 1999). However, the label public intellectual usually triggers all sorts of mostly negative connotations and many popular intellectuals are accused of dumbing down research and being more interested in media attention than rigorous academic research. Public intellectuals operate in a marketplace of ideas, which is indeed a market (Damrosch 1995), and thus follow certain principles that resemble markets. Attention seeking headlines, superficial synthesis instead of deep analysis, and controversy instead of moderation are just a few features that many would associate with this marketplace of ideas.

I would like to present an alternative, a more nuanced view of the public sphere that does not necessarily correspond to the view sketched out above. In order to this, it is useful to think of a differentiation in the public sphere. Using the example of European Studies we are basically dealing with a European Studies public sphere, a sphere that mainly deals with European issues. This differentiation continues on the personal level, as it corresponds to individual research interests. The public sphere for a researcher who is interested in EU environmental policy is different from the public sphere of a researcher dealing with eurosceptic parties. Although there is some degree of separation, we also have to realise that the public agenda is mainly events driven and each of those sub-sections can dominate the public discourse for a while. EU environmental policy is in the spotlight during a Climate Change summit and European Parliament elections are prominent in the news cycle when eurosceptic parties are headline news. This observation has significant implications on how to think about engagement in the public sphere, as it requires researchers to be flexible in their engagement with the general public. The level of engagement is linked to the news cycle and fluctuates between phases of high and low issue salience. Both extremes require different approaches as we are dealing not only with two different discourse environments, we are also faced with two very different target groups that are prominent in each scenario: a more expert target group during the cycle of low issues salience and the general public during the phase of the high issue salience. In practical terms researchers need to follow two different public engagement strategies; one for a period of low issue salience and another one for periods of high issue salience.

### ***a) Public engagement during low issue salience***

Low issues salience, ie when an issue is not considered important by the public, is one of the most common challenges for scholars working on EU topics. Although this is slowly changing, it is safe to argue that not all EU topics enjoy the same amount of public interest. In the aftermath of the European Parliament elections 2014, the issue of euroscepticism was understandably more important than EU environmental law. However, in terms of public engagement this is not necessarily a problem. Low issue salience allows researchers to focus on network- and reputation building. For many researchers these are already part of their routine. However, it may be useful to think about network building in a more strategic fashion. The aim should be to become an established source of expertise in the non-academic environment of the respective field of expertise. In other words, the specialised public sphere needs to get to know the name and the research interests of the scholar in question. One way to start this process is to carry out a mapping exercise that allows the identification of the key groups and individuals that act as gatekeepers in each area. Following the two examples from above, a researcher focusing on EU environmental law needs to think about the main journalists that cover environmental issues in the country he or she is based in - as well as a handful of journalists working on the EU level. The next step is to identify organisations or individuals that shape the debate – think tanks, NGOs, business organisations, trade unions etc – and regularly visit their events, follow them on social media and engage with them on a regular basis. The aim is to establish a researcher (or a department/project team) as source of expertise within a specialised public sphere. Organising public events that don't resemble academic conferences could be another idea to attract a wider audience. However, all those activities need follow-up strategies that keep the outside audience regularly informed about the work of the researcher(s). The most important (and cost effective) tools in this context are digital. Blogs, podcasts, videos, social media combined with regular and personalised emails are useful ways to stay in touch and start a conversation with the previously defined target group (see toolbox below for a more detailed description of those tools). Over time this will create a solid reputation for individual researchers and will allow the creation of a non-academic network. It can also be a promising strategy to use existing projects for public outreach or include public engagement strategies into new funding applications. It may not only increase the public footprint of the said project, but it may also be possible to raise additional funding to cover the costs for public outreach activities. The mix of what is effective depends however on the choices of the individual researcher, the institutional environment and the subject area in question.

### ***b) Public engagement during high issue salience***

High issue salience for general EU topics occur on a more regular basis but niche topics may only break into the mainstream once a decade. The public debate and the media usually revolve around events which often define high issue salience. Some of these events come as no surprise; such as summits, elections, new treaties, referendums, sessions of the European Parliament or anniversaries. Other events are however not that easy to predict such as scandals, wars, crisis, natural disasters or the media response to individual Commission proposals. In order to understand the public debates in the periods that generate a lot of public interest, it is useful think about how the media works in these situations - and how it relates to the low issue salience phase. In periods of high issue salience expertise is not only sought from trusted sources that are able to react quickly, it is also important for journalists and editors to know the likely main line of argument. One of the most sought after skills in these periods is the ability to explain complex issues in simple language. Academics that are known to have this skill will find it easier to talk to journalists and editors. However, there are close links to the period of low issue salience. Without having established a presence within the specialised public sphere during a period of low issue salience, it is difficult to engage with the media during a period of high issue salience. Editors tend to rely on established and

trusted contacts – or indeed *Google*, which points to the importance of a well-established online presence. In periods of high issue salience relevant research needs to be easily accessible, the website needs to look trustworthy and contact details should be easy to find. It is also helpful to have access to a body of already published articles on a particular subject, this helps for example to “recycle” certain ideas or republish articles with minimal changes. Another consideration is the length of the high issue salience period which can range from a day to several weeks. The longer this period takes, the more chances exist to engage with the debate. However, any contribution in this phase also involves careful planning. This is especially true for events that are part of the normal news cycle and it is worth preparing a few interventions or planning an event that corresponds to the real life event. These so called “media pegs” are useful for structuring public engagement activities for academics. It can also be useful for departments to keep a calendar of upcoming relevant “media pegs” and integrate them into the general planning of departmental events. In terms of substance, “media pegs” can be used to link research to current events by explaining the background, giving an overview of the main actors involved or simply by offering a fact checking service. Interventions by academics in this phase do not necessarily need to set the agenda, instead academics should inform and provide the background to current events.

Periods of high and low issue salience are interconnected. If someone is inactive in the low issue salience phase it is unlikely that he or she will have success during a period of high issue salience, especially if one wants to get picked up by the mainstream media. However, there is also an element of self-initiative involved. It would be a rare occasion if an editor or journalist contacted an academic out of the blue. At the same time, the focus on the mainstream media may be slightly misleading in this context as - compared to other scientific disciplines - many media outlets have correspondents in Brussels and rely on news wire services for background stories. The role of academics to provide additional insights may be limited. As a result, academics should also think about engaging directly with the public rather than focusing on the mainstream media. Essentially two recent phenomena are behind this change: The most obvious factor is the so called “digital revolution” which essentially made it possible to connect directly to a non-academic audience that is interested in EU issues. The internet brings together communities based on shared interest that can be defined as a specialised public sphere. The challenge is to find the right community and start engaging with it. The second factor that is changing is the public sphere itself: the slow demise of print media and the potential of online journalism are coupled with the changing news consumption habits of internet users. The changing print media system means that academics don't necessarily need to appeal to the editors of the mainstream press; academics can safely opt for an online-only engagement strategy. How people consume news and information online should be seen as a chance in this context, as the trust and reputation of individuals that publish online is becoming more important than the name of a specific media brand. This has huge implications for academic public engagement as it allows academics – and indeed universities or individual departments - to become a trusted source of expertise. This can be achieved with the help of a range of cost-effective communication instruments.

## TOOLBOX FOR ACADEMICS IN EUROPEAN STUDIES

The second part of this paper is a practical public engagement guide for academics working in European studies, social science or political studies. It basically follows the idea outlined above that cost-effective digital tools can be at the heart of any engagement strategy that aims at influencing the public debate.<sup>1</sup> The idea behind the toolbox is to give academics a better idea about how to establish an online presence and how to use this online presence to communicate with the wider public (which includes journalists and practitioners). There are obviously costs and risks involved and it should be highlighted that this toolbox is not suitable for every academic or every topic connected to European Studies. At the same time, individual academics, universities and departments should spend some time thinking about objectives and the mix of tools to achieve those objectives.

### *a) Communicating research*

Communicating research or engaging with the public brings some additional challenges to academics. The most important consideration is that all public engagement requires serious time investment. The second most important issue is that 'engaging in the public debate' is a skill that needs to be learnt and practised. The basics of how to communicate research, how to write for a non-academic audience or how to use technology require the willingness to spend the time to learn new skills. Writing for a non-academic audience is a case in point and goes well beyond the advice to drop academic jargon; it basically requires learning a completely different style of writing. However, it may not be as time consuming if linked to existing writing projects. The core argument of a journal article can be turned into an op-ed or blog post. It is also a good exercise to summarise the argument of each journal article in a couple of sentences, this may also improve the quality of the journal article. Book projects can also inspire a series of articles for a non-academic audience. However, copy-pasting is not an option as the structure and the style of non-academic articles differs significantly from academic articles: In a nutshell, articles are shorter (600-800 words), the headline is punchier, the focus is one core argument and there is usually a link to the current public debate. Third, it is important to be willing to experiment and being able to accept a "trial and error" approach to public engagement. New technologies appear and disappear; some things work for some academics and don't work for others. Communication habits change and trends come and go. It is also a chance to be creative and experiment with new tools such as podcasts, infographics, *youtube* videos or tweets. In this context training should be seen as an opportunity. Workshops on journalistic writing skills or how to survive a TV or radio interview can be useful activities. And last but not least, a regular evaluation of the use of engagement instruments should also be part of any engagement strategy.

### *b) Political blogging*

Blogging has become mainstream over the past decade and there are several overlapping debates about blogging in an academic context (see for example Kirkup 2010; Davies et al. 2007; Kjellberg 2010; Erwins 2005; Bertram 2014). Instead of continuing this debate it may be more useful to make a distinction between academic and political blogging, the latter being more important for academics working in European studies, although several overlaps to the former will always remain. Academic blogging is often dubbed as "blogging by academics for academics" and blog posts often tend to discuss university specific topics, research ideas or indeed higher education policy. Of course this is a laudable activity and can be useful to connect with other scholars, to create communities or engage with the higher education debate but if we discuss this in terms of public engagement we may end up with an academic bubble talking to itself.



European studies scholars that are serious about public engagement should however move beyond this classic academic focus of blogging and engage in political blogging. This form of blogging aims at engaging with the political discourse. Political blogging is as diverse as journalism. It can include opinion pieces, in-depth fact checking articles, longer essays, the odd video or an info-graphic. Political blogging is also about stories and topics that the mainstream does not (sufficiently) cover – and European politics is a case in point. Journalists often tend to focus on the big events such as summits or the most controversial topics of the day. In-depth explanations that put issues in context, articles explaining details of certain policies are often missing. Although opinions are important in political blogging, academics should try and focus on transmitting knowledge or using knowledge to explain current debates. This after all is the added benefit of academics getting engaged in the public debate.

The next question is how to get started? Full control of design and functionality can only be achieved by opening a self-hosted blog. Technology has become more user-friendly over time which makes it easy to set up and maintain a blog. However, the constant pressure to keep it updated can develop into a problem. A solution could be the creation of a group blog that involves a number of academics interested in a similar topic. For example, writing one blog post every two weeks while having a team of four or five scholars can easily produce a well maintained blog with new content twice a week. But even with a group blog it remains difficult to attract a large audience without spending considerable time on advertising. The platform *Ideas on Europe*<sup>2</sup> was set-up by UACES, the academic association for Contemporary European Studies, to tackle this problem. *Ideas on Europe* is a blog hosting platform which provides a space for informed analysis by scholars engaged in European issues. The platform automatically provides an audience for individual blog posts but allows academics to keep complete control over the content. At the same time, a separate online presence can be set up which can prove useful for individual projects, groups, or networks that need a space to disseminate their research findings. It also helps to disseminate content as the platform uses dissemination mechanisms of UACES - a large membership association. Another model are the magazine blogs or multi-author blog platforms specifically set-up for academics; examples include the *LSE Europblog*<sup>3</sup>, *openDemocracy*<sup>4</sup> or *The Conversation*<sup>5</sup>. The main difference to traditional blogs is the existence of a team of professional editors who help academics to make the most of the individual articles. They also act as commissioning editors to ensure that the content that is published on these platforms is relevant for the public debate. At the same time, this professionalisation increasingly turns these platforms into online magazines that compete with mainstream media outlets – a development that may not always be in the interest of academics as the model tends to favour content written specifically for periods of high issue salience. A third group of blog platforms have been set up by universities with the aim to promote the universities or individual departments. Examples include the various blogs of the London School of Economics<sup>6</sup>; *Politics in Spires*<sup>7</sup>, a blog jointly run by the University of Cambridge and University Oxford; *Ballots & Bullets*<sup>8</sup>, the blog of the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Nottingham or *Politics @ Surrey*<sup>9</sup>, a blog of the School of Politics at the University of Surrey. It is also worth regularly reading a number of blogs (subscriptions via RSS or email) to get a feel for how it works, which issues are covered and how to engage with the debate. Finding the right platform is key for researchers but a mix of having an own blog (for periods of low issue salience) and contributing to other more mainstream platforms (in periods of high issue salience) may be a useful model that allows the establishment of an online presence by using a range of different platforms. Being present on social media can also be used to curate, disseminate own content and reach a wider audience. Writing a blog can be a creative, inspiring and enjoyable process, it can even lead to new project ideas and can serve as a networking tool.



### **c) Audio/video podcasts**

Audio or video podcasts are one of the most underrated public engagement instruments. Surprisingly, there are relatively few podcasts on European politics or EU affairs. Podcasts are hugely popular and can be a cost-effective tool to reach a wider audience if disseminated via platforms such as *itunes*, *soundcloud* or *youtube*. The production costs are rather low; a good microphone and free audio editing software (for example *audacity*) are sufficient to produce a good quality audio podcast. Video podcasts are bit more complex to produce as editing videos generally takes longer and setting up the recording equipment can be more challenging. The key is a good camera and a professional attitude to get it right. As a general rule, audio podcasts are easier to produce and can sound more professional without having to spend a fortune on equipment; it usually takes a bit more time to produce a video podcast that looks truly professional. However, the most important question is what sort of content can academics produce using podcasts as a format for public engagement? A podcast production needs to start with a decision on the format. Podcasts can either follow an interview or a conversational format; the former involves a host and guests, the latter is a more informal discussion between several people on a chosen subject. However, both formats need some scripting i.e. deciding on topics, questions and a plan that defines the general flow or structure of the conversation or interview. The perfect length of a podcast is another consideration. A short podcast (10 min) is a good format for a quick interview, longer more conversational formats can last around 30 min. The content of a podcast on EU affairs could range from discussions or interviews on current EU affairs but could also include book reviews or educational segments such as "EU facts of the week" or a short explanation of a certain EU related process or phenomenon. Podcasts can also involve the audience by replying to questions or involving students. Podcasts can be a good tool to showcase the research expertise of an entire university department. It could also be the basis for collaboration with campus radio stations or media studies departments – an opportunity to involve students and ensure a professional and low cost production.

### **d) Social media**

Social media is a conversation. Used in a professional capacity social media channels (*twitter*, *facebook*, *acdemia.edu*, *linkedin*, *research gate* etc.) can help to establish an online presence, build trust and help with networking activities. Social media is "social" and should not be used as a dissemination channel only. Of course, it is a good way build up a readership but the key is to be prepared to follow-up and engage in a conversation, regardless of what social media platform is used. If a researcher does not make time to engage in a conversation the rewards of being on social media can be minimal. If used in a constructive way, social media can be an enriching experience for researchers. It can be a good channel to follow news and the latest developments in a specialised public sphere. It is however important to realise that for a successful and enriching experience on social media some time needs to be invested to secure connections to a useful group of people; building trust through social conversations usually takes some time. For academics working in European Studies *twitter* can be a good platform to get in touch with journalists, commentators and practitioners. *Academia.edu*, *Linkedin* or *researchgate.net* are platforms that are more about networking with colleagues. Social media can play a role in an integrated communication strategy, but using social media as the only tool in an engagement strategy may backfire. Social media is most powerful if used in combination with other tools. What happens on social media and how it relates to other engagement tools is an important indicator of why academics should consider a social media presence. Increasingly, people use social media (and not the comment sections) to discuss blog posts or podcasts. Social media can be used to disseminate the content and then the direct feedback can often be used to write new blog posts or record podcasts. Last but not least, social media is about the "first contact" in terms of networking. The low social barrier to contact people can be used to engage with people that in the past used to be out of reach for academics. This may also be useful for departments as it could lead to more interesting speakers during the next student trip to Brussels or indeed new partners for a research projects.

#### ***d) Working with the media***

The relationship between the mainstream media and academics is not that straightforward. First, of all academics need to understand the importance of "newsworthiness" or what defines if a story is also a news story or an event is considered to be a relevant news item. The second element is to think about how stories about the EU get reported, which sort of stories get reported and what is missing. And finally we should reflect on what could be the role of the academic in this process. Dealing with the mainstream media also means understanding the differences in how newspapers, magazines or TV and radio report EU issues and what this means for academic involvement. Broadly speaking, there are different opportunities for academics to get involved – different media outlets have different needs for external expertise. More ambitious academics may be involved in the production of a radio or TV documentary; others prefer writing an opinion piece for a newspaper or providing a 20 seconds soundbite. However, writing for the mainstream media or being interviewed by journalists requires exactly the skill set sketched out above: the ability to explain complex issues with simple language, being proactive and the willingness to spend time on networking and building relationships. As outlined above, media training can help to acquire those skills – from interview techniques, on-camera training and writing in a more approachable style. Cowley's (2013) guide on how to deal with the media includes a list of useful recommendations: It is vital to be proactive, helpful and responsive when dealing with journalists. Academics need to be clear about what to say - and it can be helpful to produce a one pager summarising the main research findings. Research results need to be accessible in terms of access but also in terms of language.

#### ***e) Dissemination strategies***

For a successful public engagement strategy all tools described above need to be combined and some dissemination tools need to be part of the mix. Although a lot of dissemination is happening via social media these days, one of the most useful and reliable instruments in this context is a simple newsletter in conjunction with a database of relevant contacts. Sending a personalised email (via a mailmerge if possible) with the latest blog post or podcast to a list of selected journalists, policy makers and practitioners can be an easy solution to stay in touch with a network of contacts and disseminate new content. This public engagement mailing list should be separate from private contacts and academic contacts. Emails to journalists also should have a different tone to academic mailing lists: 2-3 bullet points with the core argument and a link to a longer article might be enough.

A survey looking at what policy makers in the UK expect from academics should also be considered in this context (Talbot et al 2014). The results suggest that policy makers and officials perceive academics as useful knowledge providers. When it comes to how they access academic research and expertise the study finds "that 'first contact' with research or expertise may often come through various indirect routes (newspapers, professional journals, academic journals, direct submissions) but that Senior Civil Servants tend to follow this up by accessing the direct reports of the actual research" (Talbot et al. 2014, p 11). Basically policy makers are interested in journal articles but often lack the necessary subscriptions. In terms of dissemination, academics may consider attaching a free copy of the journal article to an email summarising the research conclusions. Some other interesting results show a "direct, personal, involvement and preference for the 'spoken word' and oral exchange forms a significant component of how civil servants access academics" (Talbot et al. 2014, p.12), pointing to the importance of events and conferences that also involve practitioners. Although the costs of accessing expertise through university websites, blog platforms and social media were low in comparison, the authors note the potential in this area and explain it as a "supply side" problem as few universities operate convincing social media strategies and/or accessible websites. The conclusions in terms of public engagement are similar to what has been argued in this paper: "social media and 'web presence' are increasingly important, and may provide opportunities to support engagement between the two communities to a greater extent in the future" (Talbot et al p.12).

## CONCLUSIONS: THE SIDE EFFECTS OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

The implications of a properly executed public engagement strategy are far-reaching. It can be enriching for individuals, it may have a positive effect on the image of European studies as an academic subject and it can be used to demonstrate impact - which is becoming one of the key features of UK academia.

Individual academics should perceive public engagement as a chance to acquire new skills and an opportunity to learn how to communicate more effectively – a skill that can also be useful in other situations. It can be a good way of networking and it may even be useful for finding new research angles. Communicating research to the public and thinking about ways to do it is a creative process and can be an enriching experience. Public engagement also matters for European Studies as an academic subject for several reasons. It can increase the reputation of European Studies as an academic subject and it can make the field more visible. For universities and departments it can bring additional publicity. Engagement can also help to attract students and make academics aware of the challenges faced by graduates in a non-academic environment.

Public engagement is also often linked to the impact debate in the UK. Impact can be a useful side effect of public engagement. At the same time, impact is a notoriously difficult concept to grasp and an evaluation of societal impact of research is difficult to carry out (for an overview of the debate about how to measure impact see Bornmann, 2012; the LSE's Impact Blog<sup>10</sup> or the impact section on the ESRC website<sup>11</sup>). However, the impact debate is a reality not only in the UK but in universities across Europe and many academics are forced to think about impact more seriously. In the UK the assessment of impact has become an important part of the Research Excellence Framework (REF). According to a REF report impact includes “all kinds of social, economic and cultural benefits and impacts beyond academia” and should “show a distinctive contribution of the department’s research to that public engagement activity. This must go beyond showing how the research was disseminated” (Research Excellence Framework 2010: 3). Public engagement as discussed in this paper offers some ideas how to create "impact stories". Showing impact is often a framing issue which combines several activities to show the bigger picture. Public engagement can be framed as impact if it is embedded in a wider strategy. In order to do this, departments need to set up systems that not only keep track of public engagement activity but also help to plan certain activities as part of larger projects.

Public engagement is a personal choice and universities need to find ways to deal with it. Recruiting editors or communication professionals, creating units that support academics' outreach activity may be a useful strategy for individual departments. Universities can offer training and workshops and encourage departments to organise events targeted at the public. Universities that put money and resources into this field are generally more visible and have a bigger public footprint. However, an equally important challenge is to change the incentive system for academics. Basically each of Boyer's different scholarship functions (research, interdisciplinary exchange, teaching, publishing and engagement) should be treated equally when it comes to evaluation and career progression. As long as this challenge is not being addressed by the higher education sector as a whole, we will only see punctual change at those universities that can afford to hire additional staff to deal with public engagement.

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1 Note that other issues that have been defined as "engagement" above such as secondments, book projects, involvements in think tanks, helping community groups, teaching in high schools, engaging with policymakers etc are not part of this toolbox.

2 Ideas on Europe: <http://www.ideason europe.eu>

3 LSE Europblog: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europblog/>

4 OpenDemocracy: <http://opendemocracy.net/>

5 The Conversation: <http://theconversation.com/uk>

6 LSE Blogs: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/>

7 Politics in Spires: <http://politicsinspires.org>

8 Ballots & Bullets: <http://nottspolitics.org/>

9 Politics @ Surrey: <http://blogs.surrey.ac.uk/politics/>

10 LSE Impact Blog <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/>

11 ESRC: Impact and findings <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/research/>

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