

# Economics and the media

*Following Angus Deaton's account in the October Newsletter of the media treatment of a recent research paper which brought together the characteristics of height and intelligence, Tim Harford makes some suggestions for raising the profile of economic research and improving its reporting. Tim is a columnist for the Financial Times and Slate, presenter of the BBC2 series 'Trust Me, I'm an Economist', and author of The Undercover Economist.*

It is not nice to have your spouse abused by deranged strangers. So I was impressed by Angus Deaton's thoughtfulness in reporting on the hate mail received by his wife Anne Case, and her colleague Christina Paxson (Issue 135). Their misfortune was to have their NBER working paper discovered by the press corps, and reported as discovering that 'short guys are stupid'. Whether short guys are stupid or not, Case and Paxson have public email addresses and phone numbers and quickly discovered that short guys are short-tempered.

I write the sort of popular media reports that provoke this sort of hate mail, and I should know, because my sense is that the hate mail usually comes directly to me. I am used to it, but it still hurts. Case and Paxson have my sympathy.

Nevertheless I want to argue that academic economists should keep trying to win media coverage of their work. That work is important — or should be — and deserves to be widely appreciated.

We economists should be the first to spot a biased sample when we see one: people who send hate mail are outliers. I have realised that I could save myself some heartache if I asked *Slate* and the *Financial Times* to tone down their headlines, since the abusers rarely read my columns. But I don't, because I know that for every idiot who fires off a silly email to me, there are a thousand readers who read my words because the headline grabbed their attention.

For example, Angus complains that the Washington Post excised the words 'on average' from the quotation, 'Taller people are smarter'. But I can see why they did: because 'on average' is implicit in most statements in the social sciences and it is boring. To the extent that the redundant qualifier would have deflected any abuse it would also have deflected interested, thoughtful readers. And after all, Case and Paxson's paper does say that taller people are smarter. What we all want is for readers to look a little deeper and find out why.

In fact I am rather hopeful about the standard of media reporting of economics. Interest in the subject has rarely been higher, and for the people with the time and inclination to appreciate any subtleties in the argument — readers of the *New York Times*, *Financial Times*, *The Economist*, and so on — demand is bringing forth supply: 'Economic Scene' in the *New York Times*, written by Tyler Cowen, Robert Frank, Austan Goolsbee and Hal Varian;

'The Financial Page' in the *New Yorker*, by James Surowiecki; 'Economic Principals' by David Warsh; 'Freakonomics' in the *New York Times Magazine*, by Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner; and 'Economics Focus' in *The Economist*. The *Financial Times* publishes John Kay and my own 'Dear Economist' and 'Undercover Economist' columns; *Slate* runs columns by Joel Waldfogel and Steven Landsburg as well as syndicating 'Undercover Economist'. And that is just the microeconomics.

These writers know their averages from their marginals. The majority are economics professors. Even for those of us who are not academics, I think a love of the subject ensures that we try hard to get it right.

So let me turn the question around. Here is a capable crowd of writers with a large and thoughtful audience. What can academic economists do to take advantage of this resource?

Angus points in one direction: learn from the way the NBER 'publishes' economic research. Case and Paxson achieved notoriety through an NBER paper, and NBER is the key channel through which academics reach the media. Journalists are in a hurry. In the past fortnight I have been scooped on NBER papers by my own colleagues Steven Landsburg, Joel Waldfogel (twice) and *The Economist*. I cannot wait for the *AER*.

The journals, as Angus rightly says, need to do better. NBER is fast, presents user-friendly summaries of hundreds of pages of research, and every journalist receives the email alert at the same time. It is also free to journalists who ask politely.

The *Journal of Political Economy*, the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* and the *AEA* journals all refuse requests for free access — if they bother to acknowledge them at all. For a professional economics columnist it is worth the expense to subscribe to the *AEA*, but not the entire library. *The Rand Journal of Economics*? *The Journal of Law and Economics*? *Oxford Economic Papers*? There have to be limits, and for a reporter with a wide beat, those limits are tighter than you think.

But journals will always be on the slow side. Academic departments could easily use off-the-shelf web-based services to alert any interested party to working papers as they become available. Some entrepreneurial economists — too few — email me to alert me to interesting work. More than

once they have been rewarded with an audience of several hundred thousand readers — including a few spiteful emailers, no doubt. I hope they thought it was worth it.

Most of all, academic economists should look at what my journalistic colleagues do, week in and week out, and learn a few tricks. A column from Surowiecki or Goolsbee will put research into context, explain what was discovered, and how, and explain to busy readers why they should care — all in 1000 words or less. That is a skill all of us should want to master.

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## Cash Boost for Economics in Scotland

The newly formed Scottish Institute for Research in Economics (SIRE), which brings together researchers from ten Scottish Universities, has secured funding of £21million. The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) has awarded SIRE £9.4 million, with additional funding from the ten participating universities — Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Heriot-Watt, Napier, Paisley, St Andrews, Stirling, Strathclyde. SIRE will use the funds to recruit 36 world-class researchers (18 professorships and 18 lectureships) as well as supporting the development of collaborative research and training activities.

SIRE, directed by Professor John Moore, will create a forum for collaboration on key areas of economics research. The initial focus is on three thematic programmes — behaviour, incentives and contracts; work and wellbeing; and macroeconomics, financial linkages and the regions. Commenting on the Institute, Professor Richard Blundell — a member of SIRE's International Advisory Board — said:

SIRE is an imaginative and exciting development aimed at placing Scotland in the premiere league of economic research worldwide. It is a tribute to the historic position Scotland holds in the foundation of economic science and to the calibre and energy of the new generation of researchers in Scottish universities.

SIRE is the fifth research pooling scheme to have received funding from the SFC. It is noteworthy that the SFC award to Economics exceeds that of its predecessors in Physics, Chemistry, and Geosciences, and is exceeded only narrowly by the award to Engineering & Mathematics.

For further information see:<http://www.econ.ed.ac.uk/sire/>

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## New teaching and learning resources

### Mathematics for economics

METAL is an FDTL5 HEFCE funded project that aims to maximize student attendance, engagement and participation in mathematics for economics through the provision of an accessible and fully interactive toolkit of varied and flexible resources.

The project website will provide a selection of resources including 30 video clips that relate mathematical concepts to real world scenarios, an online question bank that provides millions of subject specific question realisations and ten teaching and learning guides that offer approaches and activities to engaging level 1 students in mathematics for economics.

#### Call for reviewers -

The project is due for completion in December 2007. Resources will be disseminated from September 2007. Anyone interested in reviewing the resources and providing some feedback please contact Dr. Rebecca Taylor at [Rebecca.Taylor@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:Rebecca.Taylor@ntu.ac.uk)

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## Electronic job market for economists (JME)

The European Economic Association has recently agreed to host and promote an electronic job market. The aim of the facility is to improve mobility and matching, especially for young researchers seeking their first job. The facility is a development of one by the Spanish Economic Association. It is now operational and can be found at [http://www.barcelonaeeconomics.org/aee\\_job\\_market/](http://www.barcelonaeeconomics.org/aee_job_market/)

The system requires independent inputs only from the demand and supply sides of the market — the EEA plays no role except maintenance. As a head of an economics department or research group you may wish to use this facility to advertise any vacancies that you may have.

The service is free and your vacancies can be maintained by yourself — you may add, amend or delete as you wish. Your vacancies will automatically be sent to job searchers who have signed up for the service.

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