

Making a mark with the media

"Impact" is the new buzz word in universities. Government, funding bodies and commentators of all sorts want to know how useful academic research is, and whether it offers value for money. In short, they want to know if it has impact. To this end the new research assessment exercise, the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF), will devote 20 per cent of its overall grading of universities to the impact of research.

For those who, like me, work in a Social Policy department, this emphasis on impact is less of a change than it might otherwise seem. The very nature of much social policy research means that, almost by definition, it is linked to matters of current public concern. This year alone, colleagues have published important work on issues as varied as child protection, competition within the health service and fuel poverty, to name but three.

And yet the REF is making academics of all stripes think hard about the potential social

benefits of their research and, very practically, about how we can get our research noticed. Changing our relationship with the media is one possibility. Consequently, blogging, Twitter and the new social media generally are taking an ever more prominent role.

In terms of public visibility for research, in the past year LSE's Department of Social Policy has been engaged in something of an experiment. In short, we are doing research with the media. The focus is the August 2011 riots and our partner is *The Guardian* newspaper. In the aftermath of the riots I was rung by their special projects editor. They had collected a lot of data on the disturbances and were thinking of taking it further, perhaps via social research. Might we be interested?

After initial discussions we decided that we could work together and agreed that timeliness was vital. Within three weeks we raised initial funding (from the Joseph Rowntree and Open Society Foundations). By early October

we had recruited a research team, combining journalists, academics and researchers from local communities in and around those most affected by August's events.

By early December we had interviewed close on 270 people and undertaken an initial analysis of the data. *The Guardian* then devoted six days – 21 full pages – to *Reading the Riots* in early December. A week later we held a major conference at LSE, at which both the home secretary and the leader of the opposition spoke. The methods of working have been novel. Indeed that continues into phase two, as we are now interviewing police officers, magistrates, lawyers and people in the local communities where the riots occurred.

The study has not been without its difficulties – journalists and academics have very different styles of working and, some of the time, rather different priorities. Yet, whatever the problems, the relationship has been enormously productive.

Is this a model for the future? It is hardly likely to become a standard way of working, but what it does show, I think, is that social policy research can be done in ways that combine rigour and speed, maximising opportunities for keeping pace with fast-moving public and political debates. And, who knows, possibly even having some impact! ■



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