

Romesh Vaitilingam

A version of this article was published on *LSE Impact* (<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2026/07/08/did-brexite-make-us-better-at-communicating-economics/>).

Romesh Vaitilingam is editor-in-chief of the *Economics Observatory* and former editor of *CentrePiece*.

Did Brexit make us better at communicating economics?

What happens when evidence meets lived experience

Ten years after the referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union, one question continues to nag at many economists. If there was such a broad professional consensus that Brexit would be bad news for the UK economy, why did a majority of voters opt to leave?

Before the vote, the UK's economists did something they rarely do: they reached virtual unanimity. Researchers in think tanks and universities produced analyses pointing in broadly the same direction. The Treasury and the Bank of England agreed the impact would be negative. Leading academic economists, including the then CEP director John Van Reenen, devoted countless hours to explaining this work.

Yet much of that evidence seemed to bounce off public debate.

Was this a failure of communication? Perhaps we needed to explain our research more clearly, avoid jargon, use better examples and engage more effectively with journalists and the public.

But the real lesson of 2016 is not simply that economists communicated badly: it is that the old rules of communications no longer applied.

The personalisation of expertise

One of the most striking features of the referendum campaign was how often economic arguments were met not with counter-evidence but with attacks on the people presenting them. Economists were portrayed as members of a self-interested metropolitan elite.

Michael Gove's much-quoted observation that "people in this country have had enough of experts" captured something real – not a rejection of knowledge

itself, but a deep scepticism about the institutions and people claiming authority.

From the perspective of political campaigning, this was highly effective. If you can persuade voters that the messenger is biased, the message hardly needs answering.

There was another mismatch too. Economists were answering the question: will Brexit make the country more or less prosperous?

But many voters were asking different questions: who should make UK laws? How should immigration be controlled? What kind of country do we want to be?

These are not questions that economics can settle. Looking back, it was a mistake to think that because the economic consequences were important, they would also be decisive.

The Leave campaign, by contrast, understood that politics is rarely just an exercise in cost-benefit analysis. It offered a simple, emotionally compelling story about "taking back control". Economists responded with discussions of productivity, trade barriers and foreign direct investment.

Both messages were sincere. Only one spoke directly to the values and identities that motivate many political decisions.

Learning the lessons of Brexit

So, what does this mean for those of us who care about communicating economic research?

The first lesson is that while better communication matters, it has limits. No amount of clearer explanation would, by itself, have resolved deep disagreements about sovereignty or identity.

The second is that researchers need to think much harder about trust. People rarely evaluate evidence in isolation. They ask

who is speaking, whose interests they represent and whether they share their values. Rebuilding that trust is likely to be a much bigger challenge than simplifying economic language.

Third, economists need to become better storytellers – not by sacrificing rigour, but by connecting evidence to people's lived experience. GDP matters because jobs matter. Productivity matters because wages matter. Trade matters because communities depend on it. Abstract statistics become meaningful only when they illuminate everyday life.

Finally, we need to recognise that public engagement is no longer an optional extra for academics. It is part of the job. Other disciplines have invested heavily in communicating evidence to wider audiences. Economics should be no different.

Professional bodies such as the

Royal Economic Society should be supporting economists in engaging with the media and wider public debate, perhaps by launching something akin to the Science Media Centre.

There is one final irony. The referendum is often presented as evidence that expertise no longer matters. I draw the opposite conclusion.

Expertise matters enormously. That is precisely why it became a target.

The lesson of Brexit is not that economists should become political campaigners or abandon their commitment to objectivity. It is that producing good evidence is only half the task. In an age when authority itself is contested, economists need to devote as much care to how evidence is communicated – and why it should be trusted – as they do to producing it in the first place.

