Congratulations to our shortlisted writers – emerging talent in social science communication

**Winners**

Once more, with feeling: life as bilingual – *Wilhelmiina Toivo, University of Glasgow*
Living and looking for lavatories – *Lauren White, University of Sheffield*

**Runners-up**

Marginal money, mainstream economy – *Max Gallien, London School of Economics and Political Science*
Biotechnology and the world of tomorrow – *Elo Luik, University of Oxford*

**Shortlisted**

Better healthcare with deep data – *Alison Harper, University of Exeter*
Child labour: making childhood work – *Sophie Hedges, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine*
What future while living in uncertainty? – *Vanessa Hughes, Goldsmiths, University of London*
Ensuring a sweeter future – *Siobhan Maderson, Aberystwyth University*
Understanding the forgotten decade – *David Pollard, University of Birmingham*
Schools, funding and donor power – *Ruth Puttick, Newcastle University*
Fostering inclusion in the face of division – *Caoimhe Ryan, University of St Andrews*
Listen to the local – *Ruben Schneider, University of Aberdeen*
As a leading, independent, academic and educational publisher, with a distinguished history supporting the social sciences, SAGE Publishing is proud to partner with the ESRC again for their acclaimed social science Writing Competition, celebrating the minds of our next generation of social scientists.

When Sara Miller McCune established SAGE in 1965, it was to support the dissemination of usable knowledge and educate a global community. Our mission, coupled with our passionate global advocacy for the social sciences, has remained unchanged.

Due to the complex nature, and often diverse subject matter, the value of social science research is too often overlooked or called into question, despite its significant impact on society. As such, the social sciences are an incredibly challenging field for voices, especially those early in their career, to be heard. Support of our next generation of academics is key. The work carried out by scholars is pivotal not only in developing but also in challenging academic disciplines and facilitating progressive conversation around key issues, ensuring that good social science enquiry and engagement with research can provide a better understanding of society. SAGE and the ESRC are closely aligned in this goal, believing passionately that evidence based social science informs a global community and fosters better public policy.

One of SAGE’s core beliefs has been to support academics throughout their research journey and we are delighted to be partners with the ESRC to once again support this Writing Competition. Awards such as these go a long way to both underscore and recognise the longevity of the social sciences and their societal value and importance. SAGE sends congratulations to all those shortlisted and to our winners today.

Miranda Nunhofer
Executive Director, SAGE Publishing
Introduction

It’s been a great pleasure to be involved for a second year with the ESRC Writing Competition in partnership with SAGE Publishing. The competition aims to encourage and recognise the writing skills of ESRC-funded students. Effective written communication is vital to demonstrate the value of social science research and to engage policymakers, practitioners and the public.

This year’s theme Making Sense of Society prompted a deluge of essays. We invited writers to tell us, in 800 words or less, how their research is helping to make sense of society, and why it matters.

The essays covered the breadth of social science, including topics such as big data, climate change, class, dementia, economic policy, education, immigration, inequality, and voting behaviour. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many essays offered theories and insights on Brexit and the election of Donald Trump. The collection of essays may well prove to be a valuable resource for future research and act as a ‘snapshot’ of world issues in the second half of 2016.

The standard of writing was high, with entrants using a range of styles to convey their research. I am very grateful to the ESRC panel and the judges for their hard work and skill in selecting the shortlist and choosing the winners and runners-up. It was a tough choice as the quality of entries was exceptional this year.

The 12 shortlisted writers impressed the judges by communicating their research in an engaging, original, powerful and thought-provoking way. Congratulations to all who made the final shortlist, and in particular to our winners and runners-up.

Dr Alan Gillespie CBE
Chair, ESRC
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.

Language is so much more than just a communication device; it is a way to understand the world around us

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.

Many bilinguals report ‘feeling less’ in their second language

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’.

20 per cent of the UK population lives with IBS

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.

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.

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.
As I talk to him, Ahmed pulls his chair into his store to escape the hot Tunisian sun. He is a retired teacher – the years of screaming children can be counted in the rings framing his eyes. Behind him is his merchandise. To make up for a small pension, Ahmed is selling kitchenware in a market near the Libyan border. Over 400 tiny concrete garages surround him, goods piled high – clothes, bags, microwaves. It looks like any other market, but note an invisible detail: everything sold here is illegal. Every good in this market has been smuggled into Tunisia. Ahmed, though he may not look the part, is a smuggler.

I research smuggling, or ‘informal cross-border trade’. I talk to people like Ahmed about their lives, their business, the experience of being a smuggler in the 21st century. I talk to people who live on the margins – of their countries, of the law, of development. I think listening to Ahmed is crucial in order to understand our society. Not because the margins are so exotic, or a living relic, a modern day Wild West. But because today, the margins are everywhere.

We group people like Ahmed into the ‘informal economy’, the black markets that aren’t registered and hence don’t show up in many statistics - surely too small to make much of a difference. Except that in Tunisia, where Ahmed lives, half the workforce is in the informal economy. In sub-Saharan Africa, it’s two thirds. In South-East Asia, it’s over 80 per cent. Globally, informal is the new normal.

This is not only an issue in the developing world: over two million people work in the informal economy in the UK, over 12 per cent of its GDP is in the informal sector, and all these numbers are steadily rising. Think cleaners, nannies, construction workers, refugees. And while Tesco is a member of the formal economy, many of the goods we buy there have made their way through complex global value chains, which commonly cross the informal economy. Think sweatshops, migrant agricultural labour, unregistered miners. Researching the informal economy teaches us about the lives of many of the most vulnerable in our society – often uninsured, without contracts, sick days, unions, fair working conditions.

But there is a far more fundamental reason why researching the informal economy is essential to understanding society today. Looking at the economy in the margins reminds us that all economies are still structured by power. While the neoclassical school has reduced economics to an efficiency game, the economies we find around us look different. They reproduce the power structures that are embedded in our societies. Even if formal institutions may promote equality of opportunity and perfect competition, they are embedded in a variety of informal rules and networks, which may benefit some and hurt others. Social capital, old boys’ networks, extended families,
ethnicity, political connections – these determine who makes it big in the world of Tunisia’s smugglers. They are the reason that Ahmed has a small booth selling kitchenware, while others, who have the right connections with the police, are making thousands every day, racing drugs across the desert. But to pretend that these institutions do not play a role in the UK formal economy would seem delusional even to a passing observer of economic life. Informal networks can help people get internships and jobs; they pass on information and influence legislation. Be it a certain Tunisian extended family and the market for smuggled gold, or the Bullingdon Club and the market for male Conservative politicians – informal networks connect our society’s power structures and economic life. They can be tools of accumulation and domination, or of support and relief.

Thinking about informal economies therefore highlights features of our economies which are unregistered, and hence often ignored, but without which the price of clothes at Primark or the career of the current Foreign Secretary are difficult to explain. It turns our focus to a large world outside of official statistics and neoclassical economics. And it emphasises how closely our economies are structured by our societies, by their networks, attitudes, traditions, and stances on immigration. It forces us to take a fresh look at how economic dynamics are also changing our societies. Informal employment is on the rise, globally and in the UK. In the age of zero-hour contracts, Uber and TaskRabbit, we are witnessing an informalisation of working conditions for many employees, as the formal economy also wants a slice of the informal pie. Ahmed’s market, formal-looking but entirely off the books, doesn’t seem so exotic now. How is this going to change our society? How do we formalise the informal? Should we? Can we?

So I talk to Ahmed, on the margins, to understand the margins that have opened up all around us.
“Look at us! We are creating the world of tomorrow!” exclaims Mike. His words bounce off the walls of the high-tech fertility clinic we are in. Outside, the sun is slowly sinking into the smog of New Delhi’s skyline as the streets fill with commuters. The brutal socio-economic inequality between the haves and the have-nots of India’s economic miracle is laid bare in rush hour traffic. Shiny luxury cars, taking wealthy businessmen from high-rise offices to palatial homes stop at the traffic lights outside. Beggars approach them, knocking on tinted windows to beg for a fraction of that economic wonder, a share of the spoils of India’s integration into global neoliberal trade systems, so that they can feed their family for the day.

The traffic is a distant background noise in our meeting, where a handful of entrepreneurs from different parts of the world are building a business out of bringing together the inequality outside the clinic with the biotechnology inside it. They are all in the business of transnational commercial surrogacy, where women are paid to carry and birth babies for foreign ‘intended parents’. Their clients are people who are unfortunately unable to have children themselves. Surrogacy’s underlying technology of IVF, where a baby is conceived in a petri dish, rather than in the womb, is impressive. But surrogate women to carry those pregnancies can be hard to find in many countries. This shortage, combined with high costs and regulatory restriction, has given rise to the outsourcing of surrogacy to low-income countries like India.

In this globalised economy, surrogacy has quickly become a lucrative business. The same women who stitch our clothes can now, thanks to biotechnology, also produce our children. The neoliberal Indian economic miracle is reaching beyond the employment of local labour in call centres and factories and into the extraction of biological vitality. The issues of worker rights and safety that continue to plague outsourced production now find new manifestations in surrogacy. A place with stark socioeconomic inequality like New Delhi is perfect for such industry. Those in chauffeured cars provide investment in technology and expertise while the poor provide its biological resource. Surrogacy is one of a growing set of industries, such as some medical trials, or tissue and organ trade, that are developing around the medical sciences and that rely on lax regulation.

Therein lies the reason for our meeting that evening in New Delhi. India had begun limiting foreigners’ access to surrogacy; there were rumours of a ban. This is where Mike came in. Getting around patchy global regulation to make profits in the intersection of biotechnology and inequality is what he does for a
living, by setting up the surrogacy business elsewhere or moving women between existing destinations in ways that make use of legal loopholes. Mike is a sort of biotech hustler. But his proclamation about him and his partners making the world of tomorrow is not an entirely unfounded one. Perhaps he is? I wonder what this world is like — a future where, according to one of Mike’s business plans, women are flown in batches between various low-income countries to become pregnant in India and give birth in Africa to best extract value out of their capacity to bear children.

Governments often accept the need to regulate surrogacy within a framework of ongoing public debate but fear the political penalty involved in legislating on a matter that the public is still unsure and deeply divided about. This passive approach has allowed the likes of Mike to become the driving forces in determining the place of biotechnology in human existence. My research is a case for a renewed sense of urgency but also confidence for the public to play a role in who we are and who we are becoming. Making sense of society is about making sense of us and the tomorrow that we choose to live in. Social science and anthropology’s core method of ethnographic fieldwork, of living amongst the people and phenomena one seeks to understand, offers the kind of first-hand experience that grounds political discussion in the lives of ordinary people. It can provide the public and our policymakers with the knowledge to help make important decisions on complex matters.

If, without such knowledge, we avoid grappling with difficult questions about biotechnology’s role in society, then the future may indeed be created by, in the words of one of my research participants, “a bunch of mercenaries going around the world” who make money first and ask questions later. I have learned in my research that biotechnology itself is inherently neither good nor bad. It is potential, both wonderful and dangerous. It is up to us to decide what kind of tomorrow we make of it.
Better healthcare with deep data
Alison Harper, University of Exeter

Is the NHS paying the price as managers are forced to firefight bureaucratic red tape, rising demand and ever-shifting policy? After ten years of micromanaging productivity, healthcare austerity, frozen salaries, redundancies, cutting services and privatising swathes of the NHS, hospitals have been left struggling to hit performance targets, alongside deflated staff and distressed, undervalued patients.

High-impact services such as emergency care have had their edges tinkered, but what of those that plod along in the background, under the same pressure to perform against budgetary and delivery constraints? Gastrointestinal endoscopy, the case study for my research, is one such service: a largely diagnostic set of procedures that inspect the lining of the bowel or stomach for cancer or other conditions.

Can we predict future demand? The answer lies in data

Capacity-planning tools that support organisational decision-making, such as computer simulation, can help to understand future capacity requirements due to expected changes in demand. Can we predict future demand? The answer lies in data. A methodology that uses both demand modelling and capacity planning allows patterns of future demand on the service to be explored, and assesses the consequences of this on service delivery. Data generated by hospitals and other sources opens up huge opportunities.

Many organisations are already using data analytics to benefit society, from disaster management to education to the management of natural resources. Healthcare has been slower to catch on. Using data to model future developments inverts the usual form of finding and testing a hypothesis to create a solution. Instead of building knowledge at an individual level, and basing decisions on small amounts of data, we can look at large and varied datasets to comprehend patterns on a more universal level. By pooling the experience of millions of doctors and patients, the most effective treatments and most unexpected side effects can be identified. Likewise, operational decision-making, inherently political and loaded, can be supported by data. This will never replace human agency: the key to the application of data-based technical skills will always be creativity, imagination and intellectual risk-taking, especially in healthcare, where people are both the subject and object of decision-making.

What of endoscopy, which turns out to be an exemplar case study in modelling future demand?
which is influenced by demographic change? As a
service most used by older people – the cancers it
investigates are primarily diseases of the elderly – it
will be heavily impacted by the effects of our rapidly
ageing population.

My research modelled demand for endoscopy using
official population projections and historical hospital
demand data in a retirement hotspot, South Devon.
It showed that in this region, isolating the effects of
population growth and ageing predicts a significantly
higher demand for endoscopy services over the next
ten years than the population of the same region is
projected to rise.

Many organisations are already
using data analytics to benefit society

For capacity planning, this figure was adjusted by
known future policy changes designed to improve
population-level health – namely public awareness
campaigns and a change to hospital performance
metrics – to create an adjusted demand scenario
predicting up to a 60 per cent increase in demand
over the next ten years.

A simulation model then used these future demand
predictions within a computerised representation of
the system, to assess the consequences of changing
demand on the service. Capacity initiatives such as
seven-day working or restructuring the service can
be explored within the simulation model, to discover
the best approaches to meet the expected changes in
demand over the next decade.

This methodology isn’t a ‘black box’ technique,
obviating public interests and reducing distressed
and worried patients to little more than entities in
a process. In capturing the effects of demographic
change and policy on future demand for an essential
service, the data and its applications support patient
needs, and allows transparent planning and creativity:
intrinsically human characteristics that cannot be
reduced to crunching numbers alone. While relying
on data, this methodology doesn’t forget those who
stand behind the numbers: the patients who need
to know one way or the other which direction this
crossroad in their lives will take them.
Child labour: making childhood work
Sophie Hedges, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine

In a Tanzanian rice field, families take a break from the harvest to chat and share a joke. The joke today is the mzungu researcher who stands awkwardly, gently sweating under the midday sun, asking if she can interview their children. Their father is bemused but welcoming. He’s curious about the tablet we’re using for the interviews. “They don’t teach us about that here,” he says, “computers are for rich people. Life here is hard, a lot of hard work in the fields or herding cattle. What’s farming like in the UK? I bet a lot of people have tractors or horses, but here we plough by hand.” We have horses, I tell him, but people mainly ride them for fun rather than using them for farming. This tickles him. Why on earth would you ride a horse when you could drive in a car?

There were countless moments like this during my fieldwork – me trying to make sense of Tanzanian society, and people trying to make sense of me and my research. My project collected data on how children and young people aged seven to 19 divide their time between school, work and leisure. International policies aim to promote schooling and abolish formal work for children, and generally assume a trade-off between the two activities. However, this ‘either-or’ approach has been criticised on two grounds, and my research aims to address some of these problems.

Firstly, policies are based on a western ethnocentric understanding of childhood, in which children’s place is assumed to be in school, and their work has little importance. This makes sense in contemporary Western societies, where formal education is necessary for economic and social success, and children’s work is of limited value. However, it ignores the realities of life in developing societies such as Tanzania, where school is risky. Long journeys between home and school, harsh discipline and a lack of secure jobs make education a high-stakes game, with many families unable or unwilling to play. For families still reliant on subsistence agriculture children’s work is valuable and even vital to household economic security. Additionally, children themselves value working as a way to help their families and gain important skills, as demonstrated by the African Movement of Working...
Children and Youth’s request that the ‘right to work’ be recognised by UNICEF in their Convention on the Rights of the Child. This more positive view of children’s work receives little attention in policy or the media, however.

The second criticism is that a discourse focusing on the negatives of children’s work leads to unhelpful definitions and data. The majority of working children do household chores and work on family farms, yet there is little data on how these activities interact with school attendance. According to International Labour Organisation definitions, over a quarter of the children I interviewed are child labourers. However, this statistic would make little sense to those who participated in my study. Most of these children are also attending school, and it is seen as children’s responsibility to help their families. Working on the farm or doing chores is an important part of growing up and gaining respect within the community, and gives children complementary skills to those they gain in school.

My research derives from studies within evolutionary anthropology and demography, which have highlighted the benefits of children’s work. By collecting data on children’s time allocation to all activities, I aim to present a more nuanced consideration of the relationship between work, school and leisure. This more critical approach matters, because making sense of developing societies according to our own standards is unfair and stigmatises families who must make difficult decisions. It is also important to challenge assumptions, which can prove to be incorrect.

I found that girls actually spend more time in school than boys, yet also contribute more productive work to their households. Girls seem to manage this by sacrificing leisure time. This echoes the ‘double shift’ faced by many women in Western societies, who face expectations that they will both work and shoulder the burden of household chores. Achieving equality in education and the workplace is important, but a shift in focus towards challenging gender stereotypes may be needed to achieve gender equality at home as well.

Re-evaluating what constitutes a ‘good’ childhood could also be useful in making sense of issues in our own societies. We are facing a crisis of childhood obesity and children’s mental health, yet continue to require developing countries to aim for Western-style childhoods. A childhood with more responsibility and worth beyond academic achievement, as well as more physical activity, could help to bolster children’s self-esteem and health. Recognising that we can learn from other societies, rather than seeking to impose our own ideals of childhood, could be beneficial for everyone.
To many of us it feels like events of 2016 have plunged us into major future uncertainty. Brexit and the election of Trump are likely to bring significant shifts to lives that have been fairly comfortable and stable for many of us in the West. Instead of witnessing wars, famines, regime collapses or environmental disasters from a safe distance, such events are coming closer to our everyday realities. The war in Syria and other conflicts have brought large numbers of refugees to Europe’s borders. Austerity measures have made food poverty a reality. And an underfunded NHS is struggling to provide sufficient care to all who need it. All of it means change from a world we know to something unknown. This sense of uncertainty is unsettling, disorientating and at times frightening. Yet while for many of us an uncertain future is a new feeling to negotiate, there are many in our society for whom such uncertainty has been a familiar companion for some time.

In my PhD research I work with young immigrants in London to try and understand how they make sense of their worlds, and how their immigration experience and status have shaped and continue to shape their lives and identity. They all have different stories, different reasons why they are in the UK, how long they have been here or how they feel here, but what they have in common is that they are all facing an uncertain future.

The reasons for this uncertainty can largely be found in an immigration system that is forcing a sense of temporariness onto those who want to live in the UK. Most immigrants now are given some type of temporary status to stay in the UK. Whether a refugee from Syria, a student from Australia, a high-skilled worker from India or joining a family member, your right of stay in the UK will be limited over time and restricted in access to entitlements, while being subject to continuous scrutiny to prove your value to the British state and society.

Furthermore, during this time the potential future citizen has to prove their deservingness to permanent residence through their exemplary behaviour before applying for British citizenship, an increasingly highly valued good. If not, they could fail the ‘good
character’ test when applying for citizenship – a scrutiny that most British citizens escape through the privilege of holding the ‘right’ passport, or ‘the little red book’ as one of the young people in my research called it.

Imagine Sarah’s* situation. Together with her family she came to London from West Africa at the age of four. While she has some memories of growing up there, her home is London. This is where she went to school, where her friends are and where she grew up. London is the place she knows and where she feels she belongs.

... citizenship as a legal status significantly determines our chances and future possibilities

When we first met in the hustle and bustle of a South London college she was totally at ease, while I shifted uncomfortably in my chair. She was confident, ambitious and a successful student. I felt uncomfortable calling her an immigrant while I had the privilege of calling myself a British citizen, even though she had spent more of her life in the UK than I had. She felt more British to me than I did. But how we feel is not on the list of eligibility criteria of the Home Office. Instead the luck of the draw in the birthright citizenship lottery determines which state we legally belong to in the world. For Sarah that is a state in West Africa and for me it is the UK and Germany, which do not align with our actual feelings or lived experience.

Furthermore, citizenship as a legal status significantly determines our chances and future possibilities. Sarah and I both grew up imagining similar futures of going to university and pursuing professional careers. Yet our different immigration situations and changes in education policy meant that this future was real for me in 2004 and blocked for Sarah today.

The dream of her future was shattered just a few months before we met. Although she was offered a place on her course and university of choice, she was told she would be classed as an international student, increasing her fees three-fold, and that she was not eligible for student finance. She had no means of self-financing her studies and is now on a ‘forced gap-year’, as she calls it.

This story illustrates that the globalising world we live in looks very different for different people, depending on geopolitical positioning and the citizenship among other factors. Mobility and opportunities are not equally accessible to all, and are historically constituted. The consequences of these systems are real and matter, leaving Sarah to wonder what future she will have.

* The name has been changed to protect anonymity
Ensuring a sweeter future

Siobhan Maderson, Aberystwyth University

My research? It’s only of interest and relevance to people who eat food. If you’ve managed to transcend the biological links that connect you to the myriad other species who share this planet, feel free to look away now.

I’m studying the environmental knowledge of long-term beekeepers. By investigating what they have seen during their years of beekeeping, we gain a deeper understanding of exactly how and where the environment is changing, and how these changes affect pollinators.

Lately there has been a lot of media interest in and life science research on bees and pollinators. Pollinators are in trouble, and about 75 per cent of everything we eat and drink is dependent on them. We would probably survive without them – but that’s all it would be. Survival. If you think British cuisine was grim before Oliver and Ottolenghi, imagine it without pollinators.

Beekeepers are recognised as key stakeholders when it comes to monitoring and protecting bee and pollinator health. Some beekeepers were involved with drafting recent government policy initiatives which aim to reverse pollinator decline. My research raises important questions as to whether new policies will have their desired effect.

My interviewees have been keeping bees for at least 20 years – some for 50 or even 70 years. I’ve found that beekeepers develop a heightened awareness of wider environmental trends, such as changes in weather and flowering times, and the frequency of other bird, insect and animal species. Long term beekeepers are environmental sentinels and qualitative research on their knowledge can enhance other forms of environmental research, which are often temporally and spatially limited.

Recent years have seen a ‘participatory turn’ in governance. Efforts are being made to make government more accountable and inclusive, with 2016 notable for showing the level of political disenfranchisement felt by many. Political decision-making processes affect us all – and the wider environment. It’s more important than ever that policymakers, and the democratic process, engage with people who have been left out of the traditional networks of power. But are these efforts really working? And what happens when disparate voices collide with vested interests?

As we move into a ‘post-truth world’, we need to think about multiple truths and perspectives. And when it comes to bees, this means engaging with diverse, often contradictory beekeepers’ opinions, and incorporating beekeepers’ critiques of agricultural practices into land-use policies.
For every optimistic beekeeper who tells me pollinator strategies are succeeding because bees are in the media, I find another who is profoundly sceptical about whether government responses are anything more than window dressing. Many of my interviewees believe that protecting pollinators will require radical changes.

Let’s start with our food system. Producing and providing food for our ever-growing population has powerful environmental impacts. Industrial methods of food production are dependent on staggering quantities of pesticides, fungicides, and herbicides. Monocrops are grown on a massive scale. Bees and other pollinators are a vital part of the food systems that sustain us all. And yet our industrialised food system damages pollinators.

Long term beekeepers are environmental sentinels

My interviewees are passionate about their bees, and this often leads them into a deeper engagement with their natural environment. In our increasingly digital age, we need to engage with what these people know and what they see. Their observations are more than a quirky hobby; beekeepers are holders of local environmental knowledge (LEK).

This tacit, experiential knowledge exists in Arctic communities’ observations of changing ice patterns, in Turkish fishing communities, and in British beekeepers. All these groups are united by their long-term engagement with the natural world, and their knowledge of environmental trends and patterns is a product of their long-term experience – whether that is hunting, fishing, or beekeeping.

These communities express a real love, and connection to, their natural world. Many beekeepers are concerned that, for all the government policies espousing support for our precious pollinators, there are underlying problems in our industrial food system that will undermine the best efforts of all these policies. If we truly want to protect our pollinators, and ourselves, we need to take a hard look at our food production system, and our shopping basket.

Just ask a beekeeper – their LEK could be the key to our future. Research has shown that LEK can contribute to socio-ecological resilience but LEK, and its holders, are often not granted the same respect and significance as quantitative, scientific data. My research highlights the unique perspective, and benefits of beekeepers’ experiential knowledge.

Engaging with different forms of knowledge will require significant changes to our economy, our society, and our attitude to the environment. But if we truly aspire to be sustainable, and develop participatory democratic systems that reflect the importance of the human and non-human inhabitants of our world, we need to make bold decisions that incorporate LEK.

Even the humble bee is a political animal.
Understanding the forgotten decade

David Pollard, University of Birmingham

On 17 February 2015, Kadiza Sultana, Amara Abase and Shamima Begum boarded a flight at Gatwick airport to begin their journey to Raqqa hoping to join ISIS’s conquest to revive the caliphate. None have returned. Why did three school girls aged no older than 16 feel compelled to leave the safety of London for the death and destruction promised by the putative Islamic State?

While the answer is no doubt a complex and nuanced one, three critical components must surely be their age, sense of adventure and naivety. Indeed, many journalistic analyses have fixated on the girls’ desire to find purpose, and to escape from the suffocating ennui they find at home. While the sense of purpose hypothesis gives shape to the problem at hand, the field of adolescent psychology can add flesh to the urgent societal problem of jihadi teenage recruitment.

It is the pivot from parents towards our friends that makes adolescence such a distinctive age. Teenagers want to make friends, but their social environments are often complex, and their brains are still developing. Not only have their social goals changed but so too does their social cognition and behaviour. Teenagers’ moods are more volatile; they feel higher highs and lower lows, become more sensitive to the evaluations and influence of their peers, and take greater risks in the presence of their friends. It is not difficult to see how this cocktail of cognitive change might lead to a developmental period marked by substance abuse, sexual promiscuity, suicide and accidental death.

One can see many of society’s problems reflected in the story of adolescent brain development. Brain regions associated with socialisation and self-control are not fully mature until the third decade of life, whereas areas associated with pleasure-seeking are highly active during adolescence. Believe it or not, studies have even shown that teenagers enjoy chocolate more than adults.

The dark side of pleasure-seeking manifests itself in the acts of excessive drinking and risk-taking in teenagers, particularly with friends. In short, an overactive pleasure-seeking impulse meets an underdeveloped capacity for self-control. It is no wonder that teenagers crash cars in extraordinarily
high numbers. They just love to take risks, especially with friends. They want to fit in. It makes them feel good. But to what extent do they need to fit in?

Darragh O’Reilly MYP’s now virally disseminated speech argues for greater participation and voting powers for 16-year-olds and demands that teenagers get “the freedom to achieve freedom”. One armed with knowledge of the teenage brain might ask whether there are too many developmental impediments to entrust them with political decisions.

Understanding the mechanisms of the teenage brain can help shed light on the problem of why three young girls would take the treacherous journey to Syria. They left as a group of friends seeking greater meaning as they gambled their lives on glory in Raqqa.

We can reflect on why jihadi ‘groomers’ have had such success in recruiting the young, as was the case with at least one of these girls. We are seeing the actions we might expect from those whose brains are risk-taking, seeking group acceptance and susceptible to social influence. The reasons for joining ISIS must be numerous and complex, but our analysis would be incomplete without the ever-changing teenager at the heart of the story.

With a greater understanding of the adolescent brain we can tackle the problems of this forgotten decade.

Past research has shown that teenagers might be particularly susceptible to social influence from peers when making decisions about issues as important as risk-taking and as benign as musical taste.

When to award freedom to teenagers is a question that has plagued societies across the globe. In the UK you may have sex at 16 but not watch pornography until 18. In the US you may drive at 16 but not drink alcohol until you are 21. We and many others legislate without understanding, which creates more societal tension and fewer effective solutions.

Many of our heroes were risk-taking teenagers once. Not only in the obvious realms of pop music and sport, but in politics. It was a tremendous risk for Malala Yousafzai to stand up to the Taliban at age 17 for the educational rights of girls in Pakistan. She and in fact most other teenagers are living proof that teenage impulses can be channelled for the greater good. We as a society would do well to at least try and understand this often misunderstood decade of human life.
A business man returns from a trip abroad. He looks at the high school system in his home country and concludes that it is ‘obsolete’, that schools are too big, and not providing the right education to prepare students for the jobs of the future. His answer is to carve up the school system: dividing existing high schools into smaller units, often with two or three schools operating in the same building. Confident about his ideas and solutions, he uses his personal wealth to put his plans into action. After a few years, the results are not positive. Schools clash over space: who can use the science lab? Who can use the gym? Who is responsible for the cafeteria? Who intervenes if students from the different schools fight?

You might think that this sounds far-fetched. A made-up story. That our schools, like our other public services, such as social care, health, or policing, are overseen by elected officials who decide what decisions are taken and how things operate, and they could never simply be at the whim of a single man. Yet you might be wrong. The example above has happened. It was the result of Bill Gates attempting to improve the USA’s public school system. Although potentially well-meaning, and his donation of $2 billion arguably generous, after disrupting eight per cent of the nation’s public schools he admitted his ideas had not turned out as he had hoped.

You may now be thinking, is this happening here in the UK? Can rich philanthropists fund services and fundamentally change the way they operate? What is happening in the school your child attends? What about your healthcare? Or the social care elderly relatives depend upon? Who decides how services are run? And how do we know if their ideas are working?

The answer to these questions is: we simply do not know. Little research has been carried out to date to see how philanthropists and their foundations are influencing government decision-making in the UK, or elsewhere around the world beyond the US.

The answer may be negative, like in the example here.

Can rich philanthropists fund services and fundamentally change the way they operate?

Or the answer may be positive. Donors can provide much-needed resources, help deliver more services, create new partnerships and inject innovative new ideas. Bloomberg Philanthropies, for example, has supported the creation of Innovation Teams in city governments across the US and Europe. In New Orleans, the Innovation Team helped reduce murder rates by 20 per cent in just two years; in Tel Aviv isolation has been reduced and community cohesion enhanced; whilst in Memphis the Innovation Team helped bring 53 per cent of empty shops back into use, reinvigorating the city centre.
Yet regardless of whether the impact of philanthropy’s involvement is good or bad, there is a democratic imperative that we know what is happening, we can engage with the debate, and we too can influence what takes place.

We are accustomed to questioning donations to political campaigns, and the news stories that question whether donors are providing ‘cash for access’ or ‘cash for honours’. We also readily debate how services are being delivered, such as by the involvement of charities in agendas like the ‘Big Society’, or the outsourcing of services to private sector providers such as G4S or Serco. Debates rage in the media, academia and elsewhere as to whether this undermines our welfare state, or compromises the democratic process. Is it now time that we subjected donors and influencers of our public services to the same level of scrutiny?

For this to happen, there needs to be research. Schools of thought from across the social sciences need to come together and start to analyse what is happening and why. This will draw on various disciplines and approaches, from politics, public policy, governance, policy transfer and the third sector. In addition, research is needed to engage philanthropic foundations and policymakers in open dialogue. Governments too need to play their part by publishing data and information on the partnerships they forge and the money and influence they obtain.

Philanthropy has a warm ring to it. It conjures images of charity, doing good, and of benefitting those less deserving. But we know that good intentions do not necessarily lead to good outcomes. We need to understand the ideas being proposed – by donors and others – and the impacts that these are having, so that our public services are as democratic and effective as possible.
Fostering inclusion in the face of division

Caoimhe Ryan, University of St Andrews

It has been a confounding year. In 2016, polls and pundits alike failed to predict the outcome of the UK’s EU membership referendum or the US presidential election. As the year draws to a close, as the results sink in and consequences begin to play out, many of us – as social scientists and as private citizens – find ourselves working to make sense of what has happened, what it says about our current reality, and what it means for the future.

Public anxieties about migration featured conspicuously in both winning campaigns. We should therefore expect much of this sense-making to centre on those anxieties, and on the mobilisation of the electorate in part on the basis of those anxieties.

The events of 2016 aside, when it comes to international migration it is negative public attitudes and political rhetoric that stand out most vividly, colouring our perception of the whole social context. On the face of it, it is a context that appears to be defined by opposition to immigration and the rejection of migrants on the part of national majorities.

It is my contention, however, and a jumping off point for my work that such an impression of the social context of immigration is incomplete. Approaching immigration only in terms of majority antipathy obscures the long history of everyday solidarity, support, and amity that has existed and continues to exist between migrants and non-migrants. It sidelines the agency of migrants and countless positive experiences of immigration.

As we work to make sense of how the rejection of migrants is mobilised, we should also strive to understand how support and solidarity for migrants have been and can be mobilised.

Since the late 1970s, anti-deportation campaigns have been an important feature of the context of immigration in the UK. These grassroots movements aim to generate public support and protection for migrants (individuals and families) who are at immediate risk of deportation. In my research, I examine the ways in which anti-deportation
campaigns have worked to mobilise that support.

In the face of much antipathy towards migrants, how do campaigners persuade the public to offer support and solidarity to people facing deportation?

A simple answer is that the public were not mobilised in support of ‘migrants’. Across anti-deportation campaigns, those in need of help are typically represented not as migrants, but in ways that challenge negative beliefs about migrants. In ways that, at the same time, make their plight relevant to those from whom help is sought.

[… the public were not mobilised in support of ‘migrants’]

For instance, those at the centre of campaigns are often presented as members of a local community, embedded in local life. Depending on the time and place of the campaign, they are sometimes presented as allies in struggle against adverse social and political forces. In social psychological terms, they are presented as ‘ingroup’ members. As ingroup members, their plight becomes an ingroup concern. Equally, as ingroup members they are not ‘different’, threatening, or unwanted – they are ‘us’.

The people at the centre of campaigns are often presented as families under threat or as members of vulnerable groups. Such representations argue for the legitimacy of their struggle and humanise them in the face of the largely dehumanising rhetoric surrounding migration. Campaign support becomes a matter of defending humanitarian or political values.

Anti-deportation campaigns make the case that the fate of those they are helping is bound up with the fate of those from whom help is sought. What happens to them is a reflection of who ‘we’ are and who ‘we’ strive to be as a society.

The mobilisation arguments used by anti-deportation campaigners answer many prevalent discourses around immigration, offering alternate ways of seeing people who might otherwise be seen only as ‘immigrants’ or ‘asylum seekers’; ways that foster identification, evoke our better nature, and quell concerns about threat.

Anti-deportation campaigns work to actively generate help and solidarity while simultaneously navigating social and political processes that inhibit positive responses to migrants. Looking outward, similar demands are likely to affect any prosocial cause supporting members of disadvantaged or marginalised social groups.

In the wake of this year’s divisive political campaigns, as we work to make sense of the electoral success of those advocating further division, it is vital that we do not lose sight of important examples of inclusion and support. As much as we need to understand the power and consequences of calls for rejection and exclusion, we also need to examine the tools and methods used to resist those calls and to instead bring people together.
I

Imagine the glorious landscapes of Africa’s protected areas: a pristine Eden for wildlife where elephants and lions roam freely, unsullied by human hands. The magnificence of this vast wilderness is breathtaking, its harmony is deeply appealing and comforting. In this vision, protected areas offer a refuge from modernity – a beacon of hope for a better world in the here and now.

Enter ‘the local’. A man. In the people-free wilderness. Who is he? Is he a ‘native’, a guardian of nature who can be incorporated into our romanticised vision? Could he be a villager who is illegally trespassing and hunting for subsistence? Or a poacher, shattering our utopia? Perhaps he was incentivised by an organised criminal group to track elephants, kill them, and cut off their tusks to sell them, fuelling the escalating illegal wildlife trade? He could even be a terrorist – a member of a rebel group or a notorious terrorist organisation like al-Shabaab or the Lord’s Resistance Army, trading ivory for weapons and contributing to the destabilisation of entire regions.

He is dead. An enemy-combatant in the ‘war for biodiversity’. We will never know who he really was or what story he may have told, because his fate was decided the moment he was spotted by the anti-poaching team. More and more countries in sub-Saharan Africa adopt shoot-on-sight policies in protected areas to deter people from decimating wildlife, whatever their motivation. Nature is being militarised.

The boundaries between subsistence hunters and commercial poachers are often fluid. The arbitrary categorisations are informed by processes of cultural production and subject-making. For example, while some ‘locals’ considered culturally unique or ‘valuable’, like Maasai or Pygmy peoples, may complement Western notions of African nature – and even increase the value of landscapes for their cultural tourism potential – other locals who hunt illegally are criminalised and marginalised.

The various identities are imposed upon the local by Western society. The social engineers at work are governments, conservation organisations, as well as the tourism industry and media. Yet processes of social boundary-making and its delineations between ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘us’ and the unknown ‘other’, only work because we buy into it. It is part of our identity too. Since when is an illegal hunter a terrorist? Since television documentaries like Rhino Wars or Warlords of Ivory turn into a spectacle what should rather be seen through a sober and sceptical lens.

Along with boundary-making, spectacularisation is one of a number of discursive techniques which enable and reproduce cultural productions. Their emergence is related to the neoliberalisation of nature: today, nature has to pay its way. As a land-use strategy, conservation has to be as competitive as agriculture...
or extractive industries if it is to survive. Natural resources, such as wildlife, are increasingly rendered a commodity with different actors, from governments to communities, trying to re-establish their control, ownership, and access. A constant struggle between centralisation, decentralisation and privatisation.

Another closely associated technique is securitisation. Poaching and Illegal Wildlife Trade (IWT) have been politicised and rendered a security issue at the highest intergovernmental levels such as the United Nations Security Council. People like Hillary Clinton and Prince William are beating the drum to rally support for combating IWT. What could be more popular than saving elephants and fighting terrorism at the same time?

But cultural productions, securitisation, and spectacularisation have material effects. They often form part of political projects, such as international stabilisation, national territorialisation, and processes of capital accumulation and dispossession. They legitimate and normalise violence. For example, security concerns are militarising conservation. Apart from governments, there is a growing number of civil society organisations which employ military personnel, technologies, and partnerships in conservation. On their websites these organisations convey images of heroic rangers fighting evil poachers, while ‘like’, ‘share’, and ‘donate’ buttons are strategically placed. We are made complicit in militarisation, individually and actively, by consumption.

My research aims to make sense of this mess. I am exploring the interactions of ‘global’ conservation alliances and local communities. I am particularly interested in new partnerships that engage local people to participate in joint ranger patrols and provide intelligence. There are concerns about negative social impacts, such as instrumentalising communities for enforcement, at the expense of their security and wellbeing. Therefore, my focus lies on exploring individual experiences of militarised conservation.

Experiences are inherently unpredictable due to the diversity and complexity of local contexts. By studying global-local interactions from a bottom-up perspective I am providing guidance to help all stakeholders overcome frictions for themselves. This will contribute to enabling more locally resonant and thus sustainable interventions in conservation, development, and beyond.

Sometimes I wish I could escape into our vision of African wilderness, but for me it is a myth, for I know ‘the local’ and the structures of power and domination at play.
Our judges

**Martin Ince**

Martin Ince is a freelance journalist specialising in research and higher education, and was previously deputy editor of *Times Higher Education* (*THE*). He is a frequent contributor to ESRC’s *Society Now* magazine. He chairs the QS World University Rankings and advises universities around the world on ranking issues. He is President of the Association of British Science Writers.

**Tash Reith-Banks**

Currently Production Editor for the *Guardian's* science desk, Tash Reith-Banks has also been a freelance scriptwriter, subeditor and copywriter. She worked as a writer and editor for the publishing arm of healthcare company Dr Foster, before moving to Guardian Books, where she was a researcher and contributing writer on several titles and co-authored *The Guardian Guide to Volunteering*. She has a degree in English Literature from the University of Cambridge.

**Miranda Nunhofer**

Joining SAGE Publishing in 1995, Miranda has worked in journals publishing for nearly 20 years. Her career has included work within a variety of roles in the editorial department, including for a number of years commissioning editor for Criminology books and journals. Miranda joined the senior management group in 2008. As Executive Director for SAGE’s Humanities and Social Science journals programme, Miranda drives the overall growth and development strategy for this programme comprising a list of over 250 leading titles and is actively involved in the wider operational and financial oversight of SAGE London.

**Martin Rosenbaum**

Martin Rosenbaum is a member of ESRC Council and an executive producer in the BBC Political Programmes department, overseeing a range of radio programming including Radio 4’s *The Week in Westminster*. Martin has produced and edited many documentaries for Radio 4 and the World Service, on a wide variety of topics in politics, social affairs, history, ideas and culture. He also specialises in freedom of information (FOI) and data journalism, and trains BBC journalists on using the FOI Act, writes for the BBC News website on the topic, and has addressed international media conferences on FOI and data journalism.
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