

Institution: Goldsmiths, University of London		
Unit of Assessment: 19, Politics and International Studies		
Title of case study: Informing Debates on the Politics of Expertise		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2014-2016		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Will Davies	Senior Lecturer (May 2014-Sept 2017); Reader in Political Economy (Sept 2017 – Sept 2019); Professor in Political Economy (Sept 2019 – present)	May 2014-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: June 2016-present		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact <p>Research on political uses of economics and statistics benefits policy-influencers, political analysts and public commentators by informing their understanding of the power - and limits - of expertise in today's world.</p> <p>Coverage of Davies' critically acclaimed book, <i>Nervous States</i> has raised the public's awareness of the populist challenge to 'expertise' and stimulated debate about the weakening of economists' and statisticians' influence. In addition to informing newspaper columnists' understanding of anti-expert politics (in <i>The Guardian</i>, <i>The Times</i> and <i>The Financial Times</i>), Davies' research also influenced the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) communication and engagement strategy, analysts at the European Council on Foreign Relations think tank; the development of the 'Enlightenment 2.0' project run by the EU Science Hub and had creative impact as a source of inspiration for award-winning artist Richard Whitby.</p>		
2. Underpinning research <p>Government policy decisions, in areas such as migration and market regulation, are informed and shaped by numerical evidence. Davies investigates the political uses of economics, numbers and statistics in public life and the contribution of expert knowledge to government legitimacy. His first book <i>The Limits of Neoliberalism</i> (2014) focused on how economic evidence is deployed by policy-makers to authorize different forms of regulations [R1] and informed a subsequent publication on quantification and statistics [R2]. Davies's interest in quantitative expertise subsequently led to two ESRC-funded research projects that explored how the statistical view of the world comes under strain and weakens the capacity of official economic facts to settle political disputes. These were:</p> <p>Interrogating the Dashboard: Data, Indicators and Decision-Making (September 2014-April 2016).</p> <p>This project, run in conjunction with the University of Warwick, examined how the idea of 'real-time' data (which reflects changes, as they're occurring) is replacing the conventional notion of statistical indicators. As Co-Investigator, Davies studied 'wellness' tracking apps and dashboards [R3], which led him to consider how 'real-time' data analysis was reconfiguring the political authority of 'elites' [R4].</p>		

Mapping Immigration Controversy (January 2014-July 2015).

This project responded to a wave of Home Office immigration campaigns which involved strong emotional messaging intended to communicate 'toughness' and spread fear. Davies's contribution was to conduct interviews with Home Office officials and other immigration policy experts and advisors. These revealed that immigration was a topic where politicians had become wary of quantitative expertise, for fear that statistics could inflame controversies rather than alleviate them. It appeared that (on a culturally divisive topic such as this) the quantitative language of economics and demography was viewed by many as politically loaded, and therefore unable to alleviate disputes. This would become an invaluable finding in framing and responding to the apparent crisis of policy expertise represented by Brexit, and also to understanding the context of the Windrush scandal. The project resulted in a co-authored book, *Go Home: The Politics of Immigration Controversies* [R5].

These two projects, contextualized by Davies's earlier work on neoliberalism, elites and expertise, informed the arguments and insights of Davies's trade book, *Nervous States: How Feeling Took Over the World* (2018) [R6]. This book sought to explain recent political upheavals (such as Brexit) in terms of a long-term decline of objective statistical accounts of society, and the rise of more emotionally-sensitive, 'real-time' data that can be used as a tool of influence. *Nervous States* therefore intervened in discussions of 'populism' and 'post-truth', to show (drawing on the above two studies) how the democratic arena was being transformed by a shift in the role of numbers in politics, from that of statistical facts which defy dispute (such as GDP) to the type of data that is 'mined' via technology platforms. It also provided an extensive historical and philosophical context, to the apparent challenge to expert authority posed by 'populists', and to the broader crisis of liberalism in the West.

3. References to the research

R1. Davies, W. (2014). *The Limits of Neoliberalism: Authority, Sovereignty & the Logic of Competition*. London: Sage. [Submitted to REF2]

R2. Davies, W. (2015). 'Spirits of Neoliberalism: "Competitiveness" and "Wellbeing" as rival orders of worth'. In: Richard Rottenburg; Sally Merry; Sung-Joon Park and Joanna Mugler, eds. *World of Indicators: the making of governmental knowledge*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 283-306.

R3. Davies, W. (2017). 'How Are We Now? Real-time mood-monitoring as valuation'. *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 10(1), pp. 34-48.

R4. Davies, W. (2017). 'Elite Power Under Advanced Neoliberalism'. *Theory Culture and Society*. 34(5-6), pp. 227-250. [Submitted to REF2]

R5. Jones, H; Gunaratnam, Y; Dhaliwal, S; Davies, W; Jackson, E; Bhattacharyya, G; Saltus, R and Forkert, K. (2017). *Go Home? The Politics of Immigration Controversies*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

R6. Davies, W. (2018). *Nervous States: How Feeling Took Over the World*. London: Jonathan Cape.

*All outputs available on request

4. Details of the impact

Following Britain's EU referendum of June 2016, and in establishing a reputation as a public influencer, Davies began drawing on his research expertise on quantification and real-time data to write and speak about how populist movements relegate expert opinion. His critically

acclaimed book, *Nervous States* (2018) and related public engagement activities, including newspaper articles, blog posts, public events and podcasts, have had cultural impact; raising the public's awareness of the uses, abuses and failures of quantification, improving policy-makers' understanding of the nature of the data that drives policy-decisions and inspiring new artistic production. A collection of Davies's writing during this period was published in September 2020 as *This is Not Normal: The Collapse of British Liberalism*.

Either side of the publication of *Nervous States*, Davies produced two influential articles in *The Guardian*: 'How statistics lost their power and why we should fear what comes next?' (January 2017) and 'Why we stopped trusting elites' (November 2018) which have attracted over 3/4 million page views, and another two in the *London Review of Books* 'Home Office Rules' (3rd Nov 2016) and 'Weaponising paperwork' (10th May 2018).

A. Informing leading political commentators and statisticians thinking about the use of data in the context of political decision making

Davies's popular articles were endorsed by leading political journalists and commentators. John Burn-Murdoch (data visualisation specialist at *FT*), for example, tweeted that the article on 'How statistics lost their power', "Really nails & ties together some very important points that I suspect many like me who work w/ stats have refused to confront"; Jonathan Derbyshire (*Financial Times*) tweeted that Davies' article 'Home Office Rules' "remains one of the best explorations of [Theresa] May's mental universe I've read and contains clues to her current intransigence" [S1].

Then Chair of the Royal Statistics Society, Hetan Shah, endorsed the article on statistics (2017) tweeting that it is "highly recommended". Meanwhile, John Pullinger, National Statistician, was inspired to write a letter to *The Guardian* stating that the article was "fascinating" and prompting him to defend statistical expertise thus demonstrating the influence of the research on topical debates within the profession [S2].

B. Shaping and informing policy thinking of the EU Science Hub, OECD, European Council on Foreign Relations and British MP, Lisa Nandy.

The unexpected rise of populism and the challenge to 'elites' (manifest especially in the EU referendum result) heightened political and policy interest in Davies' research. His research, was a touchstone for the 'Enlightenment 2.0' project, a multi-year research project conducted by EU Science Hub to understand the drivers of political decision-making at a time of democratic upheaval. as indicated in an endorsement by David Mair, who leads the project. Mair reveals that Davies's main contribution was to "draw our attention to the importance of physical pain and health issues in politics, an issue not addressed by other experts and upon which we have subsequently followed up" [S3]. In 2018, Mair previously tweeted: "One of silver linings of current period is outpouring of fascinating books on the crisis of liberal democracy, especially those that include philosophy, psychology and political science. "Nervous States" best diagnosis by some distance." (5th October 2018)

Davies's analysis of the challenges to the statistics community (in *The Guardian* Long Read and *Nervous States*) also informed the work of Anthony Gooch, Director of Public Affairs and Communications at the OECD, whose work aims to improve how statistical indicators are used and communicated internationally. Gooch's testimonial states that Davies's work has been "referenced repeatedly in discussions with OECD senior management as well as its governing Council" and helped to "underpin the core principles of the Organisation's new communications and engagement strategy" [S4]. He goes on to explain that his work has:

helped to underline the dangers of the disconnect between official statistics and people's realities, and the importance of going beyond averages, addressing the "geography of discontent" and engaging with human experience and emotion in the use of data and analysis to inform public debate. These elements have become central to the OECD's "Survivor's Guide to the Post-Truth World" [S4].

The European Council on Foreign Relations think tank acknowledges Davies's influence over their research on European populism, thanking him for his "insights and help in framing focus

groups" [S5] and cites Davies as providing the basis for their analysis of peace and reason in the EU [S6].

On 3rd May 2019, Lisa Nandy MP cited *Nervous States* in the Clement Atlee Memorial Lecture, 'What The Age Of Populism Means For Liberal Democracy';

"As Will Davies argues compellingly [...], our political system is built on the enlightenment values that elevated reason above emotion. But the inability to feel the power of emotion in politics has become one of the major shortcomings of our democratic system."

A transcript of the lecture was subsequently reported in the *Huffington Post*, raising awareness of the issue amongst politicians and amongst the public [S7].

C. Raising public's awareness of the political uses of statistics

Nervous States was published in the UK (2018), US, Germany, Italy and Spain (2019) and has been positively reviewed in *The Financial Times*, *The Observer*, *Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*, which hailed the book as an "interdisciplinary masterpiece" [S8].

Testament to its broad public appeal and topicality, *Nervous States* was named a book of the year in *The Guardian*, *The Evening Standard* and *Wired Magazine*. High profile journalists Max Hastings and Mathew D'Ancona both made references to the book in their columns in *The Times* and *The Guardian* respectively, with D'Ancona describing it as "brilliant". Outside of the UK, *Nervous States* has been published in the USA, Germany, Italy and Spain (2019) and has sold over 9,000 copies in the UK.

The book and related articles has encouraged public debate, played out via 12 podcasts; 7 literary festivals (including Sydney Writers Festival); a Guardian Live event (14th November 2018); the Radio 3 Free Thinking Festival discussion on 'how angry should politics get' (live discussion at Sage Gateshead, 30th March 2019, broadcast on BBC Radio 3 4th April); seminar at European Parliament, 'Truth, trust and democracy: is knowledge still power in the digital world?' – 20th March 2019; OECD Forum, 'World in Emotion' – 20-21st May 2019, Paris; FT Alphachat podcast – 31st May 2019, which attracted 27,000 listens in the first week.

D. Inspiring new creative responses to cultural issues

On 4th April 2019 Davies was invited to give a talk to launch 'Going Gone' exhibition at Jerwood Space, London in which artist Richard Whitby (recipient of a £20,000 Jerwood/FVU Award to develop a piece of work) displayed *The Lost Ones*, from April-June 2019. Whitby has cited Davies's LRB article 'Weaponising paperwork' as the inspiration for the artwork:

"The idea of 'weaponised paperwork' was something I came across in an article by William Davies that was specifically about the Windrush scandal. It just made so much sense as a way of describing what that is... Something that Davies identifies very effectively is that these processes that might seem quite benign like filling out a form actually are as significant and as violent as any sort of physical border that we might have" [S9].

The event that Davies gave his talk at was described by attendees as: "informative, exciting, interesting"; "thought-provoking, stimulating, considered"; "enlightening, entertaining, powerful. Reviewers praised Whitby's moving-image work for offering: "a snapshot of today's world through experimental and provocative artist filmmaking, confronting the "weaponised bureaucracy" in place at the UK Home Office", echoing Davies's original phrase [S10].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[S1] Tweets from John Burns Murdoch, 21 January 2017; Jonathan Derbyshire, 16 January 2019.

[S2] Letter from John Pullinger, '[Statistics are even more important in a "post-truth" world](#)', *The Guardian*, 24 January 2017.

[S3] Testimonial: David Mair, Head Of Unit, European Commission's Joint Research Centre, 22 November 2019.

[S4] Testimonial: Anthony Gooch, Director, Public Affairs and Communications Directorate, 7 November 2019.

[S5] Acknowledgement from European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) in Krastev, Ivan; Leonard, Mark and Dennison Susie. (2019) '[What Europeans Really Want: Five Myths Debunked](#)', p.23.

[S6] Acknowledgement from European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) in Dennison, Susie; Leonard, Mark and Lury, Adam (2019) '[What Europeans Really Feel in the Battle for the Political System EU Election](#)', p.20.

[S7] Transcript the Clement Attlee Memorial Lecture delivered by Lisa Nandy, '[What The Age of Populism Means For Our Liberal Democracy](#)', *Huffington Post*, 3 May 2019, [p.11].

[S8] Book Reviews: i) Suzanne Moore, '[Nervous States: How Feeling Too Over the World – review](#)', *The Observer*, 28 October 2018; ii) Mark Green, '[Three Authors Consider Contemporary Politics, Anxiously](#)', *The New York Times*, 18 January 2019; iii) Jennifer Szalai, '[How the Mind-Body Connection is Rewiring Our Politics](#)', *The New York Times*, 27 February 2019. [Grouped Source]

[S9] Interview: Richard Whitby discussing the making of 'The Lost Ones', '[FVU Frames: Richard Whitby](#)', YouTube, citation at 1'42", 5 June 2019.

[S10] Article: "'[Jerwood/FVU Awards 2019: Going Gone](#)' at Jerwood Space, London". *Mousse Magazine*, June 2019.