



## Overcoming Spin, Sensationalism, Misunderstanding, and the Streetlight Effect

**Abstract** This chapter concludes with a discussion of how to work forward from the results of Universal Basic Income (UBI) experiments to the public discussion in ways that overcome communication barriers and reduce the problems associated with them. It argues that it is not enough to communicate the findings of experiments on their own terms, but results have to be presented with an understanding of the role they play in the political economy of the UBI discussion. Researchers must relate experimental findings to the most important questions in the evaluation of UBI, even if experimental findings make only a small contribution to the search for those answers.

**Keywords** Basic income experiments • Negative Income Tax experiments • Social science experiments • Basic income • Universal Basic Income • Inequality • Poverty

Reporting the findings of a UBI experiment is extremely difficult because oversimplification is inherently easier to understand than genuine complexity. No person or group created this problem. It results from the complexity of the issue and the diversity of the people involved in the discussion. The effort to overcome spin, sensationalism, misunderstanding, and the streetlight effect will never be perfect. But there are things everyone

involved can do to reduce these problems. This concluding chapter brings together and completes lessons on this issue from throughout this book.

Everyone involved can help by recognizing how difficult it is to understand each other when the discussion involves people as diverse as citizens, activists, elected officials, appointed public servants, managers, researchers across diverse fields, science communication specialists, professional journalists, amateur journalists, and so on. Many people fit more than one category, but those who do cannot instantly solve the communication issue. The first step, as I've argued, is to work backward from the public discussion of UBI to the experimental design.

Citizens involved in the discussion can help this effort by going beyond the blanket demand for an experiment and trying to get a realistic picture of what they hope to learn. Citizens' ability to do this is limited because the public discussion involves millions of people who have very different political views and are not organized into a body. But writers within the movement can write about what specifically they want to learn from a UBI trial. Organizers can organize online or in-person public discussions of what people want to learn from UBI trials.

The people who commission the experiment and the public servants, managers, and researchers who design and conduct it can help by consciously trying to understand and respect the public discussion of UBI. The main goal of a broad-based study should be to enlighten the public discussion with evidence people can understand. Even if the study is intended to be a narrowly focused, technocratic approach to a few specific questions, it will be a part of the public discussion, and making the results understood should be one of its goals.

This suggestion does not mean that experiments must attempt to answer every UBI-related question people might have, no matter how unanswerable. It means that the public discussion can be taken into account in the design of the study and the reporting of its findings. Chapters 12 and 13 discussed claims that are important to the discussion around the world. Chapters 14, 15, and 16 suggested how to orient experiments toward these claims, even though experiments cannot definitively answer them. Foremost among these is the very reasonable desire to relate all of the experiments' findings to the bottom line: what do they contribute to the overall evaluation of UBI as a policy option?

My list of claims is no substitute for a good understanding of the discussion in the relevant political context. Not all the claims listed in Chap. 13 are relevant everywhere and additional claims will be relevant in most places. People designing tests should learn as much as they can about the local

discussion, but knowledge of it is not always a good reason to ignore this book's advice. Researchers can err on the side of caution by being more reluctant to subtract than to add to that list.

Three issues in specialist-nonspecialist communication are likely to have implications for experimental design in most political contexts.

First, the public discussion often conflates ethical and empirical issues. Empirical researchers naturally focus on empirical questions, but they too often sweep ethical questions under the rug. Researchers can best separate these issues by bringing them into the open. People with different ethical perspectives are interested in different empirical claims and often use very different criteria to evaluate empirical findings. Framing the issue in one way or another can advantage one side or another's spin on the results. A study could strive for a truly neutral framing, but it might be better off providing information that is useful to people with different ethical perspectives relevant in the political context and discussing the finding in relationship to those opposing perspectives.

Second, people involved in the public discussion are exclusively interested in the long-term impact of a permanent, national UBI on almost any variable an experiment might study. They have no direct interest in the simple comparison between the control and experimental groups in temporary experiments. No list of caveats, no matter how well written, can convert knowledge of that simple comparison into a genuine understanding of its implications for a permanent, national UBI. Without a second round of analysis and clear discussion of what it does and does not imply, research will misinform nonspecialists.

Bridging this gap requires bringing in evidence from other sources to make predictions about how community effects are likely to play out in the short and the long run. It requires more qualitative discussion of the study's findings. It requires researchers to be unafraid of calling attention to the uncertainty of the study's predictions and to the smallness of the contribution experiments make to our overall understanding of UBI. But it is necessary to help the public discussion benefit from the contribution that experiments make.

Third, as this book stresses throughout, research reports have to discuss the questions they can't answer, including the big, bottom-line questions: does it work; should we do it? Although it is naïve to hope experiments can fully answer those questions, ultimately, those are the right questions—the things we need to know when we consider introducing a policy. Even the most technically focused research question is important to the extent that it contributes to that overall evaluation.

In the absence of an answer to the bottom-line question, researchers can relate their findings to it: examine whatever aspects of it experiments can, both alone and in combination with other evidence, techniques, and theories. Then discuss the potential impacts of the things their research cannot examine. The political nature of UBI experiments and the inherent difficulty of the material make this effort essential, even if less-politically oriented research is free from this concern.

The effort to work backward is especially important to avoid the street-light effect. People designing UBI experiments might want to ask themselves: are we focusing on these questions because they are the most important aspects of the overall evaluation of UBI or because they are the easiest questions to answer with the techniques we have? Attention to the overall public evaluation of UBI might refocus the study toward variables that experiments can address only partially and toward more qualitative methods.

Researchers should not neglect answering the questions trials are best able to answer, and they might have an extremely good reason for narrowly focusing their study on issues that differ considerably from those of most interest to the public discussion, but to avoid misunderstanding, they need to clearly explain two things: why they are studying what they are studying rather than the issues of most interest to the public discussion and the extent to which their findings help answer those questions. Research reports need to appreciate how difficult these issues are for nonspecialists and that they have historically been the source of misunderstanding.

The bottom line is important also because it forces comparison of costs and benefits. Discussion of benefits in isolation biases the reaction one way; discussion of costs in isolation biases it the other way—even if the existence of that effect was highly predictable and the experimental question about it was merely how large it would be. To head off this problem when reporting on—say—a decline in labor effort, researchers need to address what that decline means in human terms, whether it can be counteracted by other factors (such as a healthy macroeconomy), what people are doing with their time, and what the likely market response to that decline means for wages, working conditions, education, and so on. These issues need to be addressed not simply to avoid misunderstanding, but also to make research useful.

Once the study is completed, the effort to work forward again to the public discussion begins. People writing about the results might have a more difficult job than is typical in science communication. It is not

enough simply to help people understand the experiments on their own terms—for example, what an experiment is, what control and experimental groups are, and what differences were found between the control and experimental groups. They have to explain the relevance of those findings to the most important issues in the public discussion in ways people can understand.

Many common errors in understanding are predictable. For example, whether because of sensationalism or professional deference, some people are likely to interpret experimental results as more conclusive than they are. Whether because of a desire to spin or overconfidence in the meaning of research, some people are likely to discuss various results out of context as if they were votes in favor or against the adoption of UBI nationally.<sup>1</sup>

People directly involved in the experiments are not the only ones who can help create a better public understanding of the findings. Anyone with good knowledge can help improve public understanding, making themselves heard—and understood—to counteract any spin and misreporting. Outside researchers who understand the place of experiments in the political economy of the UBI discussion can reexamine and represent findings in ways they recognize as more useful and less likely to be vulnerable to spin or sensationalism.

Journalists, bloggers, and anyone interested in writing about UBI trials usually have no special training in understanding the policy implications of technical experimental findings. But they can help by taking time to investigate the difficult issues involved and by trying to avoid the easy and sensational oversimplification.

Citizens—it could perhaps go without saying—can help by exploring the diverse literature that will be produced on UBI experiments and reading it critically.

<sup>1</sup>See Chap. 6 for how this happened for the labor-market findings of the 1970s experiments.