

[Home](#) > [Blog](#) > [Ending the zero-sum ga...](#)

# Ending the zero-sum game through public engagement

© August 18, 2017

Political and public debates about border control seem to be increasingly fueled by ever growing fears and concerns about various transnational “threats” such as mass migration, cross-border crime and terrorism. As a result, these debates are often politicized and emotional, only further feeding into the already negative sentiments. Other than observing this from the side-line, it is important for academics and scholars studying these and related phenomena to actively participate in these debates and provide some much-needed reflection and nuance.

## AUTHORS



**Maartje van der Woude**  
Professor of Law & Societ



## A zero-sum game

Migration, crime and the fear thereof have dominated political agendas as important themes rather consistently. Both topics have played leading roles in electoral campaigns in various European countries as well as in the Brexit referendum. While feeding into people’s fears and worries, a discourse in which every “other” who is not “one of us” – based on skin colour, religion, cultural heritage, etc. – is seen as potentially threatening. With evidence of this portrayed and perceived “dangerousness” of certain groups lacking, yet with (social) media further spinning the “othering” narrative, a socially damaging (dis)course has been set. One is either in favour of harsher measures against migration and crime or one is against it. Choosing the middle ground, or addressing the negative and potentially destructive and counterproductive side effects of being tough on crime and migration seems to be impossible, as that doesn’t fit the zero-sum approach. When it comes to crime and migration, we seem to be stuck in a downward spiral of – largely – unfounded fear and anxiety. With society’s social cohesion at stake as this spiral is contributing to processes such as stigmatisation and alienation - processes that have been linked to polarization and radicalization, it is of vital importance to break this cycle. It is here where I see a big(ger) role for academics.

## The importance of public engagement

In an era where “fake news” is an actual thing, it has never been more important for academics – or scholars in general – to actively participate in public debates. Not just to explain to the public what we do, but more so to provide accurate information and to reflect upon the heated debates with a calmer and ‘distant’ perspective. Public engagement – true two-way communication involving interaction and listening and partnerships between academic and non-academic communities – is an essential part of ensuring society gets a return on its investment in the “academy”, and that research and discovery translate into creating a better world and more fulfilled lives for everyone. It’s something that should be integral to academic culture, and the institutions that support it. Even though more academics seem to feel the need to become more publicly engaged these days, it’s fair to say that this hasn’t always been the main priority for researchers, which has led to the idea for some that public engagement just isn’t something that’s done much in the ivory towers of academia.

As an academic, I take public engagement seriously. I see it as a responsibility that comes with the societally-sanctioned licence to study the things that I’m passionate about. And I consider it a privilege to interact with others who can inform what I do as well as potentially benefitting from it. To truly engage with a non-academic audience and thus an important prerequisite to being heard, is to have the mindset that effective public engagement is not about putting members of the public in a room and talking at them. Only by stepping down the academic high horse, by not instantly and predominantly trying to defend one’s own point of view, but by truly listening before engaging in a fact and theory based discussion in which one presents counter arguments and perhaps alternative perspectives, can engagement perhaps result in a change of narrative. If you don’t, at the very least, enter a dialogue with your audience, how will you know whether they’ve understood you, let alone found your arguments convincing?

## The - very valid - hardships of public engagement

Public engagement is hard. Very hard. Not only for the reason mentioned above, the necessity to have an actual dialogue, but also because it can put scholars in a vulnerable position. Engaging in public and political debates on current pressing issues as they evolve other than by publishing about them after they have been rendered stale and outdated can make you a central figure in these debates. Whereas this could be a form of very successful public engagement, it is important to realize that becoming the centre of attention can come with – and most likely will come with – negative feedback and responses. Having thick skin is therefore required, as well as the knowledge that the path to moving through the resistance is meeting it. Change is never easy. Another valid hardship of public engagement is time. As argued earlier, public engagement takes time as it is more than launching your message into a different audience. Engaging into a meaningful dialogue to work towards change can be a fulltime job. This is obviously difficult to combine with the other key responsibilities of working in academia. Why write a blog or an op-ed if one is assessed based on one’s peer-reviewed articles? Why invest time in identifying key public stakeholders to engage in debate with, when this time could be used to write a grant proposal? Although many universities are increasingly encouraging their faculty to work on their “valorisation” - the process of using academic knowledge to create societal or commercial value – the tools and support offered to really achieve this and to also deal with the potential pitfalls described earlier, are often limited.

## A call for activism

Coming back to the central debates that in my opinion are in dire need of recalibration – anything related to crime, migration and borders – I feel it will not be enough to “just” become more publicly engaged. It is time for action and perhaps for some academic activism that requires those who value public engagement to join forces and to make a clear and audible stand. Whereas it is

easy to dismiss one academic voice, it will be difficult to dismiss a collective. Whereas public scholarship tends to be looked down upon, this is even more so in the case of activist scholarship. Although a more public – or activist – take on academia may at times exist in tension with the inquisitive nature of academic research, I believe that an activist outtake can strengthen our research rather than undermine its validity, and that inquiry can benefit activism rather than frustrate it. Activist public scholars are – and should be – concerned about the implications of their research for the achievement of a better society.

This doesn't require a presence on the barricades. There are many ways for scholars to engage more publicly. As writing comes naturally to scholars, writing blogs has grown to be an important and popular means. In the field of migration and border control, the leading example of a successful blog is Oxford's [Border Criminologies Blog](#). Other than that, one could actively seek media attention by contacting journalists or submitting Op-Eds to newspapers and/or news sites. For those scholars that feel more comfortable with a less "visible" or a less "direct" way of engaging, there's the possibility to provide journalists and politicians with facts and reflections more from behind the scenes by acting as expert advisors. And let's not forget about what perhaps is our most powerful way of communicating with a larger audience: through our teaching. By inspiring and educating the minds of our students we not only shape their narratives and perspectives, but potentially also those of their friends and families. The road ahead is long and rough, but by keeping silent and relatively invisible the journey won't get any easier. Let's feed the public and political debates with accurate information, counter perspectives, empirical evidence and more nuanced reflection to break the downward spiral of fear, anxiety and othering.



European Border Communities • Van Vollenhoven Institute •  
Leiden Law School, Universiteit Leiden • Steenschuur 25 •  
2311 ES Leiden, The Netherlands • [Disclaimer](#)

[Follow Van Vollenhoven Institute on Twitter](#)