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# Weekly links July 26: big data vs RCTs for health, we need more uncertain politicians, innovations in dissemination, and more...

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The Journal of Human Resources is trying out an interesting approach to disseminating its published articles more through social media. Scott Cunningham will be tweeting summary threads of accepted papers under #JHR\_Threads ([https://twitter.com/hashtag/JHR\\_Threads?src=hash](https://twitter.com/hashtag/JHR_Threads?src=hash)), and is also trying video interviews with authors. The first one is now up, summarizing a paper by Giovanni Peri and Vasil Yassenov applying synthetic control methods to the Mariel boatlift. Here is the paper summary thread (<https://twitter.com/causalinf/status/1153142765414420480>), and a YouTube video ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=13&v=oGenVcPsPEc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=13&v=oGenVcPsPEc)) with Vasil in which he is asked how he got into economics, and to summarize some key things about this paper.

“There is a troubling paradox lurking at the intersection of science, policy, and political discourse. We want proven solutions to major policy problems, but we also want our leaders to be certain and confident (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/getting-along-and-getting-ahead/201906/why-don-t-politicians-admit-when-more-research-is-needed>). In many cases, achieving the former will require relinquishing the latter.” Patrick Heck in Psychology Today discusses why more politicians don’t sound like the conclusions to many of our papers (i.e. admitting that more research is needed).

The debate of whether non-experimental evidence can be used in place of RCTs rears its head again in medicine. Stat news notes that the FDA is now required by law to explore whether big data from electronic health records etc. can replicate the results of clinical RCTs (<https://www.statnews.com/2019/07/03/replicate-clinical-trials-real-world-evidence/>). This has led to debate about how useful such an approach can be. They quote one diabetes expert “real-world evidence simply cannot supplant traditional clinical trials. In his view, real-world evidence can only correct for biases that researchers already understand... How many times would Aetion have to replicate a clinical trial before Nathan believed the results? “Infinite,” he said.... Nissen had a similar answer as to whether he’d ever be OK replacing randomized controlled trials with observational data. “Absolutely not,” he said. “One hundred percent not. It’s dangerous. How often have we been misled by observational research over the years?”. On the other hand, proponents noted several advantages, especially cost, time, and inclusion of a broader population, noting that these admin-data based non-experimental approaches might be particularly useful for understanding safety once efficacy trials are completed.

Ben Olken’s NBER SI master lecture slides on “the challenge of social protection in the developing world ([http://papers.nber.org/conf\\_papers/f130252.slides.pdf](http://papers.nber.org/conf_papers/f130252.slides.pdf))” – focusing on three areas that make delivering social protection different in developing countries – targeting, program design issues, and governance/preventing leakages.

Book launch: **Transparent and Reproducible Social Science Research: How to do open science**, (<https://www.bitss.org/2019/07/23/transparent-and-reproducible-social-science-research-a-new-open-science-textbook/>) written by Garret Christensen, Jeremy Freese, and Ted Miguel was released this week. The textbook offers a comprehensive introduction to open science tools and methods. Use the code (17M6662) for a 30% discount with the publisher (<https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520296954/>).

In sad news, we lost a good economist and a great human being way too early: Ephraim Wadonda Chirwa, who was a collaborator of Berk in his work in Malawi, died from a sudden illness last week. Here is a tribute (<https://www.ids.ac.uk/news/in-memory-of-professor-ephraim-wadonda-chirwa/>) by some of his colleagues. It is a big loss for the development community and our thoughts are with his family, friends, and colleagues.

The Review of International Organizations will publish a special issue “In memoriam: Stephen Knack” in honor of our former colleague. This special issue seeks to publish papers that build directly or indirectly on Steve’s work as it overlaps with the focus of the journal, broadly defined. Papers should employ new theories, innovative methods, and/or new empirical evidence that can help us better understand important political economy issues in international organizations and development cooperation. These may address a range of different questions, issues, and organizations on topics linked to Steve’s research, including, but not limited to:

1. Social Capital; Trust; Institutions; Governance; Corruption; and Democracy
2. Aid Fragmentation; Multilateral Trust Funds; Delegation of Implementation; Aid Graduation
3. The Nexus of Aid, Institutions, and Growth; Aid Dependency; Quality of Aid

The deadline for submissions for the special issue is April 15, 2020. Submissions should be made through Editorial Manager (<http://www.editorialmanager.com/roio/>), indicating that the submission is to the special issue (“SI: Knack Memoriam”).

## Authors



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