

Academics and the media in Australia

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Little has been written about the relationship between academia and the media. This essay describes three models through which academics can engage with the media: as generalist or public intellectual; as advocate or activist; and as educator or sub-disciplinary expert. It couches these models within both the traditional wariness of academia towards the media and changing landscapes such as the rise of blogging and the 'corporate' university. It argues that engagement with the media is a valuable form of academic service, if practised within an ethic of self-restraint.

Introduction

Surprisingly little has been written about academia's relationship with the media in Australia. The exception has been a recent interest in defining and naming 'public intellectuals'. The public intellectual is someone who can move easily between topics, drawing on a variety of philosophical positions or contextual understandings. Public intellectuals are exalted, but rare, birds. Most of the literature focuses on them (Carter 2001, Small 2002a, Wark 2001, Grant, Nile 2006).

But they are just the tip of the iceberg. Academics can move between three models of media engagement. One is the public intellectual, a true generalist. Another is the advocate, an activist for (or against) reform. The third is the educator, the sub-disciplinary expert. This essay defines and explores these roles. It draws in part from law, my discipline of 17 years, but is generalised to the broader academy.

Historically, academics were wary of the media's tendency to scandalise and inability to convey the nuance which scholarship prizes. This scepticism is pronounced in disciplines where practitioner or lib-

eral educational values counsel modesty and impartiality. The disciplinary upbringing of most academics as specialists, rather than generalists, means few are groomed to become public intellectuals. Yet many engage in advocacy and education in the media. With media diversification, there are more outlets than ever, including through blogging.

There remain good grounds for ambivalence about the media and, indeed, the 'corporate' university's hunger for publicity. The essence of academia is not mere opinionation or reaction to cycles of controversy, but reflective expertise. The intensification of media cycles ensures that concerns about media scandalisation and shallowness remain relevant. In addition, the internet risks fragmenting public discourse as much as it may democratise it.

However, there is consonance, as well as dissonance, between academia and the media. Thus, whilst some wariness is justified, engagement with the media, if practised with self-restraint, is a valuable extension of academic endeavour. It should not be mandated in every academic job description. But it is a natural, public calling of academia as a whole.

Media and academia – consonance and dissonance

Ostensibly, both the media and academia are in the business of 'knowledge production and dissemination' (if you can pardon the jargon). Each generates, filters and publishes information, whether as news or research findings, together with analysis and ideas. Each seeks to influence public debates. However, it would be misleading to over-emphasise the analogy between the two spheres. Whilst intellectual ideas influence public discourse, academics have little direct power to shape debates, whereas through selection and inflection, editors have a significant, even constructional influence over the public agenda (Maley 2000, Severin & Tankard 2001, ch. 11).

The role of the media – at least the bulk of it, in its commercial manifestation – is often depicted as delivering an audience to advertisers. The media have a mass audience, whereas the university's audience remains fairly elite: students and disciplinary colleagues. Contemporary, 'corporate' university management may configure students as paying customers, but the teacher-pupil relationship remains rooted in scholastic goals of generating understanding and insight and fostering inquiring minds and skills.

Academics care to paint their work as special, if not unique. We do this by appealing to the notion of scholarship as a set of methods and protocols designed to reveal truth. From that vantage point, many see academia as far removed from the mission of the media. Even from a practical angle, the enterprises create knowledge under quite different productive environments. Journalists work under tight deadlines and a fair degree of editorial dictate; academics assert academic freedom and ideas require time for gestation and reflection. Journalistic investigation, even of a public-spirited kind, has to be *ad hoc*, entertaining and angled; academics work in an empirically comprehensive manner and measured language.

Nonetheless, once we accept that academia's role is not merely the creation of scholarship, but the 'advancement of knowledge', then university life cannot be limited to a conversation within and amongst the universities. It is also concerned with imparting ideas through teaching and community service. An important aspect of community engagement – one form of service – is disseminating knowledge through the media. Let us now consider the models I propose of academic media engagement.

Models of academics in the media

The roles of public intellectual, advocate and educator are not exclusive. Indeed, a single activity may straddle all three categories. For instance, a public intellectual may simultaneously draw on broader social and intellectual currents (a feature of the public intellectual), whilst agitating for institutional or conceptual reform (a feature of advocacy work) and describing developments in non-specialised language (a feature of the educator). It will also be apparent that the models have some relationship to three common descriptions of academics generally: those engaged in theory, those engaged in praxis and those focused on teaching.

These categories are not essentially distinguished by their impact or profile, although on such measures the public intellectual rates higher than the activist, who rates higher than the educator. Nor does the categorisation imply a normative hierarchy. It is no more laudable to be a public intellectual than to be an advocate or educator. Rather, they are distinguished by differences in scope and agency. Public intellectuals tend to dictate the topics of their public engagement, through essays and opinion pieces that range across fields and even disciplines.

Advocates and activists, in contrast tend to negotiate, for they are pushing awareness about an issue. The educator tends to be more isolated and ad hoc. Educators are sub-disciplinary specialists, summoned from their university's media 'experts' list when a journalist requires background or clarification. The public intellectual is rarer but has more agency than the advocate, who is less common and has more agency than the educator.

My categorisation may seem idiosyncratic, but any typology will be. US physicist Alan Lightman (2000) defines 'public intellectual', as simply any academic who 'decides to write and speak to a larger audience than their professional colleagues'. Lightman's definition, however, is too broad for Australian usage. In Australia, public intellectuals lie between the two upper levels of his classification. They exist in a range between the expert branching into the social and political terrain surrounding their discipline, and the god-like Einsteins or Steinems who come to symbolise some paradigm of thought (respectively, an humane scientific rationality and a brand of feminism).

This conception of the public intellectual as a generalist accords with a definition offered by prolific US scholar, Judge Richard Posner (Posner 2001, Posner &

Myers 2002, cf. Dessaix 1998). Having written a book on just about every topic, including *Public Intellectuals: a Study of Decline*, the ubiquitous Posner is an embodiment of the public intellectual. His position is echoed by He Weifang, Peking University lawyer and public intellectual: 'A public intellectual needs to care not just about his branch of learning, but also about society' (Weifang 2005).

The public intellectual in Australia

It is an old lament that Australia is anti-intellectual; unlike an imagined continental Europe (cf. Jennings 2002). In this lament, it is not just the parched climate that renders Australia infertile to public intellectuals, nor even the undoubted tendency of some media to 'dumb things down'. Academics and creative people are also at fault:

The intellectuals with their old maidish modesty and diffidence had let this country become a backwater, a paradise of dull boring mediocrities, a place where the artist or man of ideas could only live on in sufferance. (Grant, p. 76)

This lament intersects with a contemporary concern about the 'death of the public intellectual', itself a symptom of 'anxiety about the viability of ... "the profession of thought"' (Small 2002b, p. 1). In this view, public intellectualism has been pincerred on two fronts.

The first pincer is a decline in media values. The media has fragmented and in that process, it is said, distinctions between enlightened debate and infotainment have elided, to the detriment of current affairs reporting (Turner 1996). Pre-existing tendencies to scandalise have been overlaid with an assumption, imbued in wider society, that all views, however (un)informed, are of equal value. This misguided egalitarianism is reinforced in some school pedagogy and played upon by politicians keen to promote anti-intellectualism (Hamilton & Madison, 2007). It manifests itself in the prominence of talk-back radio, although the neutrality of the space provided by talk-back is subject to engineering by agenda-driven radio hosts (Adams & Burton 1997). In this new world, there is little place for expert voices, unless they are willing to replace thought with opinion (Ignatieff 1997, p. 4) and compete with spin and provocative opinionation, and thereby becoming part of the 'punditry' (Gitlin 2000).

The second pincer comes from within the academy and its publication hierarchies. To Guldi (2009), the humanities in particular retreated behind a wall of European influenced theorization that distanced both its language and interests from that of everyday discussions. This process was reinforced by the metrification of the 'publish or perish' doctrine, so that quality of one's arguments was less important than the academic standing of the publication outlet. More public forms of expression, such as a book accessible to an educated but general readership, were discounted. This in turn led to a flourishing of ever more specialised journals,

fragmenting the conversation of the university.

Others, in Australia at least, have diagnosed not a death, but a recrudescence of the public intellectual. For Carter (2005) this is a product of an 'economy' of relations between market, media

and academy, driven more by the culture wars than a flourishing of individuals. In this rebirth, Carter diagnoses a paradox in the same public intellectuals decrying a weakening or decline in public discourse. He sees, in much of that, a self-aggrandisement, a 'fantastic, even grotesque' claim for intellectuals to play the role of 'the nation's saviours'.

What many bemoan is not an absence of intellectual voices from public debates. Rather it is the ineffectiveness, even of the most eloquent, in terms of affecting public sentiment let alone outcomes during social controversies. Without a hint of lament, Posner claims US public intellectuals serve but two functions. The first is entertainment - the best of them at least provide some sparkle. The second is solidarity - they tend to be chosen for their outspokenly liberal or conservative opinions (Posner 2001). If Posner is correct, then the media's tendency to conflate provocation and attention-seeking with 'talent' and to present ideas as a battle between warring opinions, can be corrosive.

In its older manifestation, the public intellectual did not need to be a gadfly, commenting on every passing event. A single but sweeping contribution, such as the Boyer or Reith lectures, would suffice (e.g. Krygier 1997). Topicality was no substitute for depth. The theorist, being by nature a generalist, played a greater role than outspoken persons with ambitions to join the commentariat. Trying to bridge the old and new,

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Robert Manne observed that whereas 'public intellectual' once connoted 'engaged scholar', the term has since broadened and 'democratised' to include anyone who comments regularly, 'interestingly' and with 'depth' on 'public issues' (Green & Rood 2005).

One does not need to possess expert knowledge of the intricacies of a field, let alone a solid theoretical basis, to fit Manne's definition. A scholarly dealing in ideas is hardly the exclusive domain of academics (Davidson 1995). A 2006 list of Australia's Top 40 Public Intellectuals, courtesy of the immodestly named 'API (Australian Public Intellectuals) Network', neatly split into 20 academics and 20 freelance authors, novelists and politicians.

If being a public intellectual were essentially just giving 'interesting' opinions, it would be a role in which any engaged scholars ought downplay their credentials. It would not be something done truly in the course of employment, however many brownie points it earned with their university's external relations unit. The better definition of a 'public intellectual' is a generalist who is informed by philosophical positions and contextual understandings.

Listing public intellectuals has become a parlour game. Besides the API list, the *Sydney Morning Herald* produced a top 10 in 2005. In both, legal academics are conspicuously absent, although two lawyers, Justice Michael Kirby and Father Frank Brennan, appear. Instead, the lists are dominated by historians. This may reflect a country perennially grappling with its history and identity, particularly when the 'history wars' were raging. Few scientists appear either, only the ubiquitous Dr Tim Flannery and Professor Fiona Stanley (and the latter for her family advocacy rather than her day job as a health academic).

Australia is a distinctly utilitarian society. It is not that people knowledgeable in technologies (whether the professions or the sciences) are undervalued. Rather, technologists are experts in narrow domains and not free-rangers. Amongst scientists, cosmologists are an exception, as Professors Hawking, Sagan and Davies attest. But having insight into the origins of the universe justifies a certain celebrity, given the 'goose bump' effect (Calavita 2006).

The role of public intellectuals is also context-specific. They proliferate in the US, for instance, where media markets are more diverse. The more broadcasting hours and miles of newsprint there are to fill, the more opportunity there is for 'talent'. However, diversity can create a clamorous din in which voices are

lost, so that the quantity of media speech may vary inversely to its impact. Modesty thresholds matter also: outspokenness is highly valued by most Americans. But this does not guarantee fame for mere outspokenness. Law Professor Cass Sunstein claims his greatest media impact was not made by dint of his intellect or even personality. Rather it occurred when, bored of repeating arguments against impeaching President Clinton, he convinced CNN to let him appear with his Rhodesian ridgeback. Viewers responded enthusiastically, wanting to know how to acquire such a beast (Jacobson 2006). Sunstein's anecdote reveals the primacy of infotainment. It also confirms the definition of the public intellectual as having significant agency. He not only bargained an appearance for his pet, he convinced CNN to run a later story on the legal incidences of an airline losing one's dog.

Blogging as Public Intellectualism

One's chances of becoming a public intellectual in Australia are slim. Within many academics, nevertheless, there lurks a wannabe public intellectual, if only enough editors would pay attention. Even in Continental Europe, where the importance of the intellectual was historically cultivated, there is limited demand for public intellectuals and no explicit career path. One recent strategy has been to seek to turbo-charge an academic profile through blogging.

Blogging is do-it-yourself public intellectualism. It encourages free-ranging commentary and, through hyper-links, it facilitates integrated discourses. Unless it is merely a form of self-exposure, like publishing a diary, the very purpose of blogging is to reach a wider audience. Much has been made of the transformative potential of the internet as the future of media. However blogging, and indeed the entire Web 3.0 (or interactive web) phenomenon, at their worst exemplifies the potential for the internet to undermine the public role of 'the expert' and corral debates into warring camps.

There are numerous, prominent social science bloggers in Australia. Well known examples include economists John Quiggin and Steve Keen, social scientist and lawyer Andrew Leigh and political commentator Peter Brent. Each successfully integrates blogging with the more traditional role of newspaper commentary. Brent is an interesting example of a junior academic using blogging to gain prominence.

Blogging in Australia, however, has only a fraction of the influence, density and variety of blogging in its

spiritual home, the US. Part of the reason for this is the nature and size of the markets. Even a niche area like US electoral law, for example, has spawned several high profile and highly professional blogs (e.g. Hasen). Blogs in and science law tend to the particular, rather than the general. This fits disciplines where in-depth, technical specialisation is bred at the expense of generalisation. Such blogs are less an outlet for public intellectualism than a public resource, an open-archive of expert musings on specialist issues.

Several factors militate against blogs becoming a common bridge for Australian academics into the public domain. One is the size of the audience for Australian issues: most blogs become discussions amongst friends, with the odd troll to enliven things (a troll being an anonymous provocateur). Another is university workloads: there is limited time to attend to the core demands of publication, administration and teaching, let alone the daily commitment of a sustained, professional blog. One alternative is the group blog (e.g. the left-of-centre sociological blog, *Larvatus Prodeo*). It is a short step however from a group blog to an online newspaper (as *crikey.com* has demonstrated).

The Advocate

The advocate is a familiar figure in the social sciences. Confronted with threats such as nuclear weapons and global warming, it is also a role familiar to some scientists. Historically academics have not been shy of advocating causes. But they tended to do so via community lobbies. Such bodies could channel their discipline and rhetorical expertise. There is an innate modesty about this, since the influence of others plays a mediating role. Participation via such groups is also attractive because the status of the group can amplify one's pitch.

Such groups still exist. Whether out of public-spiritedness, to satisfy 'community service' obligations, or simply out of the joy of engaging with community issues, many academics will be involved with such groups at some time in their career. But today, academic activism is also pursued directly, rather than through intermediate groups. This says something about the evolution of the voice and profile of academics beyond the cloisters. It also reflects a social trend

away from associations and ideology, and towards individuals and single-issues.

Professor George Williams, a high-profile constitutional expert, once described himself as an activist. By this he meant his scholarship was guided by key law reform causes such as a bill of rights. He has advanced these through a Centre (the Gilbert + Tobin Centre for Public Law), through traditional academic means such as research grants, conferences and publications, and through submissions to inquiries and the media. The term activist however is loaded. It implies pushing for

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reform. One can just as readily advocate *against* reform. Professor Jim Allan, a prominent conservative opponent of a bill of rights is an example of this.

Advocacy in the media inevitably raises old concerns about losing nuance

and reflectiveness in pushing a cause and of elevating ego above expertise. To Raimond Gaita there is a need to 'discipline the tendency in public discussion to forsake understanding for polemic' (1996, pp. 34-5). Gaita stresses that the *tone*, rather than the breadth or volume of one's utterances, is essential to intellectual life. Given the *ad hominem* nature of much debate in Australia, even when their own tone is respectful and their views backed by research, academic advocates cannot necessarily expect respectful responses: this much is illustrated by the cases of Professor David Peetz and others (Hamilton and Maddison 2007). The internet, with its sense of anonymity, exacerbates *ad hominem* attacks. An academic who recently published a comment on media bias was put in the stocks by News Ltd columnist Andrew Bolt, who cut and pasted the academic's picture on his blog. The blog then became a forum for vituperative attacks by readers, of such *ad hominem* and anti-intellectual quality as 'Smug little git has an eminently punchable face' and 'What else would you expect from a tax leach. Another case of those who can't do, teach' (Wilson 2009).

The risks depend on context. Professor Weifang (2005) was asked if there was a 'conflict between the social responsibility of public intellectuals and the demands of their scholarship'. He rejected this as a 'false premise'. Engaged intellectuals take an intrinsically scholarly approach to their engagement; conversely great thinkers are remembered because they engage with issues of public importance. In China, cul-

tural factors, such as reverence for intellectuals, may provide a more stable recognition of the role of academics in public affairs. But there is a counter-balancing self-restraint practised by most Asian intellectuals, part of a wider cultural preference for less combative approaches than we are used to in the Millian, anglo-phone world.

In relation to immodesty, as long as the advocate confines herself to a few causes in which she has passion and expertise, she does not risk overreaching the way a public intellectual might. But colleagues may still see the activist as lacking humility. She will be pushing editors, for instance, and perhaps under her own name rather than as spokesperson for a formal movement. Her best defence is that the cause should be judged on its merits, not any egos attached to it.

The Educator

The educator-in-the-media will be the most familiar model. It harmonises with the conception of academics as expert-teachers. It encapsulates the more limited, ad hoc requests that academics are most likely to receive when an issue captures the media's attention. The media turn to academics for discussion points, angles, background and explanation. The motivation may not be elevated: the journalist may simply want to pad out a story with quotes or to lend it gravitas by citing an 'expert' but with little interest in what is said or who says it. But motivation is irrelevant if the net effect is to give the academic an audience, to add to the swirl of public information and ideas.

This educative role can be difficult. Reflecting a lack of agency (except to decline a request), the educator may have little say over how their words are used. Only a few sentences, if any, may be attributed. The interview, especially if for broadcast, may take hours to arrange, including re-takes to make the interviewer sound perfect and ad nauseam, clichéd shots of the academic strolling on campus or seated before such artefacts of learning as books or a computer. A diligent academic may need preparation for an interview, especially if the topic is intricate. In commenting on individuals, there are ethical and tortious obligations to treat the protagonists fairly.

Few opportunities to play the role of educator give the academic much time to prepare or to speak in-depth. Exceptions are rare. The rarest choicest (if lowest rating) is Radio National, where programmes like the Health or Law Reports offer 5–10 minutes to explore a topic.

More common is an invitation onto talk-back radio. Superficially, this may seem to be the antithesis of Radio National's sober reflectiveness. But not always. Radio is a dynamic medium. Talk radio is time-rich and relatively unplanned. The better producers let the 'expert' guide the preliminary discussion, and listener questions can be as diverse and engaging as one gets from a narrower group, such as university students. (The most insightful questions I have fielded were during the ABC graveyard shift: all credit to insomniacs and truck-drivers).

A third outlet that allows the educator to play a less constrained role is the 'op-ed' or opinion article. This may involve cultivating a friendly editor, since most unsolicited material is ignored. Increasingly there are outlets for online publication, such as *ABC Unleashed* and *APO (Australian Policy Online)*. Op-eds require streamlined prose in short paragraphs. Some academics see this call to pithiness as a dumbing-down. But it is no mean discipline for those (especially in law) otherwise rewarded for prolixity and jargon, to rediscover tenets of communication, such as addressing one's audience, that after all are the hallmarks of good teaching.

The educator in the media is nonetheless constrained by her context. Media ownership in Australia is concentrated, in risk-averse proprietors and editors-in-chief who at least unconsciously affirm the perception that Australia is not an intellectual nirvana. Whilst public broadcasting in the two countries be on a par, for historical and market reasons there is not the diversity of quality newspapers in Australia as in Britain.

Mediaphobia and the modern university

Academia can be a cloistered and a bitchy place. Take the experience of a young historian, whose PhD was promoted by a literary agent and who became a regular on the ABC's 'Einstein Factor'. She found 'middle aged male academics' deriding her as too 'entrepreneurial' (Green & Rood). Given how the modern academic has to become an entrepreneur to compete for funding, 'entrepreneurial' should not be an epithet for promoting one's research. However, the response may not have been pure jealousy. A research reputation is priceless in academia: broadcasting has the potential to exploit and even trip-up young and telegenic academics.

Mediaphobia, or at least scepticism, remains a legitimate academic position. It is a response to three media traits, which are linked by the media's propensity to

distort rather than simply mediate. These traits are the media's short attention span and the churning of news cycles; the media's preference for the scandalous or titillating, over considerations such as public policy; and the media's elevation of opinion into analysis. Each of these is anathema to the academic desire for reflection, depth and expert nuance.

Let me relate two blatant examples. At the height of interest in Pauline Hanson's criminal trial, a Sydney radio station contacted me. Without pausing for introductions, the voice said: 'It's the 2YY newsroom. Will you come on air and bag the Director of Public Prosecutions?' Declining this loaded invitation, I was asked, 'Can you recommend someone who will?' A second egregious example arose from television reporting of the same issue. A commercial network edited my comments in mid-sentence, deleting a significant qualification. They did so to invent a black-and-white viewpoint, not out of concern for comprehensibility, as the comment wasn't a complex one.

Such experiences are not confined to commercial media. Public broadcasters can inject editorial slant (Maley 2000). Typically, problems occur through misunderstanding or constraints of space and time, rather than malice. But, whatever the cause, it scares some into avoiding the media. For others, the lesson is to negotiate with journalists for a right to vet any quotes, or to do only live interviews. Another bugbear of many academics is the media query which is more akin to a lazy student's request for research assistance than a genuine request for comment. Backgrounding journalists can be thankless; but the alternative is unleashing an uninformed journalist or beat-up on the public.

It is not just journalistic practices which present pitfalls for academics. The corporate university can inflame matters. Universities are now competitive businesses as much as spaces for advancing knowledge. Universities market themselves as brands, hence media attention is one way university bureaucrats measure success. External relations staff will contact academics at odd hours and beseech them to comment on issues outside their domain or send 'urgent' emails to all faculty calling for 'immediate comment' on some fleeting news item.

Harmony with restraint

How might we harmonise media engagement with academic values? Leaving aside egoistical and financial benefits (Posner 2001) such engagement can have intrinsic benefits. Journalists bring contemporary controversies to academics for reflection and comment. Communicating in a tight framework to a broad audience can hone one's plain English, and trigger reflection on one's assumptions. A similar reflexive process occurs when we engage with students.

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Achieving such harmony, however, requires the academic to act with integrity as much as it does on any media training. No-one should feel pressured into media work if it does not cohere with their personality and skills. Academics need to operate

within their limitations, whether social or intellectual. They need to say 'no' to media invitations outside their expertise. Integrity thus demands self-restraint.

At its simplest, this means that someone who is unusually shy should avoid broadcast interviews. It is a condition of employment that academics conquer their reticence about public speaking to make a fist of lecturing. But no-one is obliged to appear in the media. Invariably the media can find another expert. A media appearance that bombs is more than ego-deflating and harmful to one's reputation: it is likely to be unenlightening.

Whilst in the ideal intellectual, the mind is 'uncontainable' (Lightman 2000) it is a rare confluence of gifts and fortune that make up the public intellectual. Such gifts are suppressed in many academics, given the factitious technicality of most sub-disciplines. This doesn't mean that academics should not be active citizens. It does, however, require self-restraint. For example, when participating in public debates, even at the 'graffiti' level of letters-to-the-editor or blog contributions, academics should not mis-use titles and affiliations. Another example is referring onwards invitations outside areas of genuine knowledge and interest.

The same self-restraint asks academics to be wary of partisanship (Devins 1999). This is not a call to be dispassionate: dispassion may be artificial and dull. A strong philosophical position does not mean allegiance to party or faction. Provided one's philosophi-

cal positions are consistent, but adaptable, one can be controversial without being partisan in the doctrinaire sense. But there is a collective action: the media is likely to favour those who will meet its preference for stridency.

Self-restraint also requires public passions to arise from interests rooted in expertise. Passion is a laudable element of the models of academics as advocates and public intellectuals. There is some analogy with the idea of liberal education, which counsels teachers against overt partisanship. But the counsel is not quite as strong. Teachers should foster informed debate amongst students, conscious they have some monopoly and power in the classroom. The academic in the media possesses little power, let alone monopoly, over their audience.

Not ceding the field

Self-restraint however should not lead to over-constraint. A collective disengagement from the media is untenable, in part because of tenure. Not every academic has a personal obligation to contribute via the media, but because as a whole we enjoy some intellectual freedom, funded in large part by public revenues, the academic community must engage in public debates and education (Bernstein 1993). Ceding the field will not leave the field empty either: if academic experts did not engage, others less expert will. Writing about contemporary economic commentary, Millmow and Courvisanos (2007) argue that academic economists are 'reticent' compared to their forbears. That reticence might maintain scholarly purity. But it does not mean that ongoing reporting will be impartial. Instead, the media is filled with financial market economists, who bring a particular market perspective, ideology and self-interest to their commentary.

The analogy we began with, between the media and academia as two parts of the 'knowledge production and dissemination business', is a superficial one. The media's power in constructing the public sphere carries risks. Academics should not become hired mouthpieces in agenda-driven debates. Yet academics cannot mandate balance: that is up to editorial forces beyond our reach. The media's ultimate focus is on dissemination, that is on reporting developments in entertaining or provocative ways. The dissemination of academic knowledge has traditionally centred on processes designed to ensure respect for complexity and nuance.

Nonetheless, the media is an inescapable force. The question really is the degree to which academic discourse can adjust to use the media in the dissemination of intellectual insights. Without sacrificing the self-restraint necessary to retain integrity, from the most prominent public intellectual contribution, to the most particular act of public education, media engagement can be a valuable extension of academic endeavour. Media engagement should not be mandated in every individual's job description, but it is an important calling of academia as a whole.

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