

# Academic Engagement in Public and Political Discourse

## Notes from Academic Engagement Brownbag #1

Friday January 24, Michigan League, Room D (3rd floor), 12:00-1:30pm

---

### Brownbag Focus:

**What do we mean by public and political engagement?** In this first of three brownbag lunches for winter 2014, we discussed the various forms of engagement that our faculty conduct; what are considered “appropriate” forms of engagement; where are the lines between being a content provider and being a political advocate; and how these fit with the types of scholarly engagement advocated by others (such as Roger Pielke Jr.’s *Honest Broker*, or Donald Stoke’s *Pasteur’s Quadrant*).

Five separate group discussions explored these questions in depth. We concluded by discussing the overarching themes in a combined session.

---

### OVERARCHING THEMES

#### Authority/Expertise

One overarching theme was that of **authority; who has it, why do they have it, and in what domains do they have it?** The standards for academic authority differ significantly from those who enjoy cultural authority within the broader society. Authority in one domain does not necessarily translate into the other. While both the academic and popular media are, effectively, arenas of discussion, these vary quite significantly in terms of their purpose (to adjudicate versus inform or entertain), standards of admissibility (theoretical rigor and relevance versus newsworthiness and salience), format (peer reviewed publications versus topical events, editorials, comics, etc.), and audience (other academics versus the general public or politicians).

**Social media** is changing these arenas of discussion. On the one hand, it makes relatively “private” academic conversations much more open. We can no longer debate the scientific merits in private, and then provide a unified voice in public. On the other hand, social media allows others to enter seemingly scientific debates in public areas. Any number of interested parties can enter the public “scientific” debate by posting a white paper, editorial, blog or comment. People that read these can find “answers,” whether scientifically based or not, to support nearly any conclusion they wish to reach. Given such challenges, we as academics cannot know how our research will be interpreted by others in the broader cultural context. **Media engagement** is a new and challenging domain for which many of us are untrained. In that domain, journalists often presents several sides of an issue in an attempt to create “balanced reporting” for contested issues. However, in presenting dissenting opinions as 50%-50% in an article, when scientific opinion might be more unified (say 98%-2%), the media skews the story.

Several additional questions emerged in the meeting. For example, **how and when did we lose the place of public authority we once enjoyed in the 1950s and 1960s?** One thought is that we lost that place when we became “too good” at what we did. If we wanted

support for our scientific work (for example a super collider), we had direct access to policy makers and got it. In this way, we became just another constituency in the contest for resources and attention. Another thought is that corporate and political actors, whose material interests are challenged by the conclusions of our work, can mount pseudo-scientific responses to the science of the academy (for example, the claims and counter-claims over the safety of cigarettes).

Another question that emerged was: **why are we doing this in the first place?** What is the goal of the academic who enters public and political debates? Is it to inform the public and play the role of educator? If that is the case, we cannot avoid social controversy and disengage to the safety of the ivory-tower. Is it to influence the policy process? If that is the case, there may be more direct routes for engagement that do not involve the messiness of many of today's social debates.

One final question is that we need to be realistic about **the range and scope of influence that we can enjoy when we can engage.** If we are experts in climate science, we can present the corpus of the science that says that human-induced climate change is real. Can we then make policy prescriptions about what to do about it? Further, can we present this work when the scientific community may be divided on the best way to go? Finally, how do we deal with forms of challenge or professional punishment that may occur for taking public positions outside our domain of expertise and are acting as citizens to serve our personal interests (say, the Israel/Palestinian debate).

Regardless of the answers to these questions, it was recognized by many that **the academic domain and its system of rewards is changing.** For example, NSF funding criteria and many tenure decisions are now considering the broader impacts of that research. The evolution of rewards systems provides the best signal that public and political engagement is becoming increasingly valued.

---

*Below are summaries of the discussions in each of the 5 breakout groups.*

### **Group #1**

---

1. Public education and advocacy by scientists should be proportional to the level of consensus on an issue. While outreach and advocacy are valuable when one represents the majority view of their discipline, the same outreach and advocacy can be grossly irresponsible when there is ongoing debate.
2. Playing out scientific debates in the public can be destructive. The public tends to trust scientists precisely because they are a conservative bunch, and historically, haven't spoken until there is consensus. The risk of encouraging scientists to participate in more public education and advocacy is that scientists do not speak with a unified voice, leading to confusion of the public, and distrust of scientists as a whole.
3. Along with point 2, the media often provides scientific discourse that is confusing to the public, and that suggest there is more debate or controversy than there really is. This is common in the point vs. counter-point forms of journalism.
4. As a follow up to point 3, scientists are lousy at conveying uncertainty when speaking to the public. They acknowledge unlikely scenarios as being scientifically 'plausible', and they hedge their statements in a way similar to how they do so when speaking to colleagues.

5. Moving from “providing facts” to “advocating” is a one way door. Once you move into advocacy, it is very difficult to move back into the “providing facts” camp

## **Group #2**

---

Our discussion began with a consideration of what constitutes public engagement but quickly moved into consideration of the benefits and challenges of public engagement. The discussion notes below report our comments about social media, the role of public engagement, the relationship between research area and public engagement, working with the media, and retaining our integrity as academics.

### Social Media as a Form of Public Engagement

A number of people in our group commented that social media were not part of engagement for them. One member suggested that social media may be used more both by younger faculty but also by those who have less in the way of organizational and professional association ties at this point in their careers. Our group felt that social media could be a way of engaging other colleagues but also could be dangerous and prone to misuse or misunderstanding.

### Role of Public Engagement

Our group had disparate views about the role of public engagement. One member expressed doubt about the ability of academics to separate information from advocacy. Another member, however, thought it was irresponsible to simply generate information for public dissemination. He felt that academics had a responsibility to explain their findings and to place them in a proper context. Still another stressed the role of public education more generally, explaining that part of our role as educators was to provide information and guidance that would allow for more informed public debate.

### Public Engagement Viewed Differently Across Disciplines and Subject Matter within Disciplines

We discussed the extent to which public engagement may depend upon discipline and, within disciplines, on our research interests. One participant noted that 19<sup>th</sup> century sociological inquiry probably would not yield significant public interest. She also noted that there was a tension between what she termed “applied work” and more traditional sociological research. Another participant noted that in education there are academics that focus on peer-reviewed journals, which tend not be read by practitioners and others who are more focused on informing those who are educators “in the field.” Still another member noted tensions in psychology between research with public policy impacts and more academic research questions. Scientific integrity and important questions may be in tension.

### Challenges of Public Engagement Involving the Media

One participant described struggling over whether to engage with the media given the limits of how well the media informs public policy discussion. Public engagement can embroil academics in controversy. It also can be seen by colleagues as publicity-seeking behavior. Another participant noted that the role of the media is not to promote our research. He suggested that we were most effective when we could make three discreet points at the most—but that our research often was not so easily reduced to its essential elements. Still another member said that he thinks we must choose our media outlets with care. He only speaks to reporters who are well-versed in his areas of expertise or at least willing to allow him to review their stories before publication to make sure that they are

accurate. Participants agreed that we are not well-trained about how to interact with members of the media and noted that tactics that work well to focus attention in the classroom can be misunderstood by many reporters.

#### Maintaining Academic Integrity

How to present our research in ways that maintain our academic integrity was another challenge identified by the group. Public engagement, particularly on controversial issues, makes it difficult for us not to appear biased, which can undermine the integrity of our academic research. On the other hand, if we do not engage in public discussion, our work can be misrepresented, which also can be harmful.

### **Group #3**

---

We quickly agreed that we should be engaging in public and political discussions, while also recognizing the self-selection bias of our group. We then moved into a discussion of 'What is appropriate?' Our answer is that 'It depends on...'

#### What we see as the purpose of higher education

If a university holds a civic responsibility to serve the public good, then all faculty should be contributing to that - in what and how we research and how we distribute that knowledge.

#### Our discipline/department

Norms vary quite significantly across the university, i.e., kinesiology studies childhood obesity, while public health studies the elimination of childhood obesity. In some schools, overlap between personal and professional perspectives (social work, public health) is valued and rewarded, while in other schools these perspectives are considered separate and potential conflicts of interest.

#### Our career stage

Tenure track faculty must be especially aware of tenure and promotion criteria, which may only value the production of research and not the applicability/use of research.

#### Degree of controversy of the research

Risk to researchers' credibility is a function of the degree of controversy associated with their research (i.e., climate change mitigation, use of electronic cigarettes, soda consumption and childhood obesity). Even the dissemination of knowledge can become a position and, thus, appear as advocating.

#### The role of individual researchers versus that of the university

Some basic researchers are not able to translate their work well. In such cases, others at the university would be better able to communicate their findings. Conversely, some universities take this dissemination role quite seriously, even for cutting-edge and more controversial research.

### **Group #4**

---

#### Discussion of Expertise vs. Advocacy

- Michael Mann's NYTimes piece "If You See Something, Say Something" asserts that it is the responsibility of all scientists to embrace roles of public engagement, pressing for action on climate policy

- Rejoinders to the Op-Ed claimed that although it is certainly the right of scientists to be citizens and have opinions, it is important for scientists to differentiate between one's direct area of expertise and when stepping beyond specific expertise into broader scientific discourse
- What defines and constitutes expertise?
- The difference between "being an expert" and "being informed" can be a blurry line
- Academics are skilled in critical thinking, analytics, interdisciplinary communication that can leave them well-positioned to comment intelligently on a variety of issues
- How much does training as an analytical thinker allow one to assert oneself as being an expert rather than merely having an opinion?

#### The Humanist Perspective

- Although much of the focus is often on scientific communication/engagement, there are a variety of ways in which the issue is relevant to the humanities
- Humanists can contextualize current issues and events, contributing analogies to other societies and cultures and using knowledge of the past to inform the present
- In the changing climate of higher education, humanities departments are struggling to maintain relevance, despite the large number of graduates from liberal arts departments. What is the place for humanities in higher education and how does changing norms and degraded emphasis on humanities education affect our society?
- Is a lack of critical thinking in the general population a reflection of the reduction in solid educational foundation of thinking about society, the world, and one's place in it?
- A better understanding of literature, philosophy, history, etc. allows greater introspection and can allow the public to be better critical thinkers
- The eroding of public trust in academic expertise may be linked to a more systemic issue:
  - "Is science taken seriously?"
  - "Is science education taken seriously?"
  - "Is education taken seriously?"

#### Early Career Stage Engagement

- Early career perspective: "So far, I've been keeping my nose clean"

#### What is Appropriate/Inappropriate Engagement for Academics?

- A single person may be all four of Pielke's definitions, depending on the context
  - In Situation A, may be an issue advocate
  - In Situation B, may be honest broker,
  - Etc..
- Science is inherently biased due to the fact humans are involved. Engagement/advocacy is just a more extreme end of the value spectrum
- However, when one looks at the foundations of science (i.e. the Scientific Method), there is not a historical place regarding value judgments. Scientists are trained to form hypotheses and test them, without discussions around embedded values in the science itself. It would follow that scientists are adverse to advocacy roles given the foundational underpinnings

#### Democratization of Knowledge

- Society has changing viewpoints of authority
- Everyone has access to data, even if it is of differing quality
- John Stewart as a respected news source – what are the implications?
- "What authority you have is the authority people recognize"

- Even though academics may think there is a range and significant difference btwn a pundit and communication specialist and academic researcher, the lines are more blurry from the public's point of view

What is the End Goal?

- Reason for engagement and appropriateness may change depending on the objective
  - Influencing policy?
  - Influencing public opinion?
  - Providing evidence to foster critical thinking?

## **Group # 5**

What are forms of engagement? Examples:

- Title VI - established by JFK to promote area studies expertise outside government
- Robert Reich - sticks to facts and says "if we adopt this policy, here's what will happen"
- Letters to the editor
- Op-eds
- Interviews on NPR
- One participant wrote an article in a scholarly journal advocating federal regulation based on research on the work hours of interstate truck drivers because the nature of his research (trucker fatigue, accidents, etc.) led logically to a policy conclusion. Scholarship that is directly about a policy issue such as truck driver hours is different from scholarship about other kinds of issues
- One participant sat on a national advisory committee for the Department of Labor. Her seat on the committee was designated for a "representative of the general public." She was allowed to do it, but got zero credit from UM. Then she won a Regents public service award this year for this work

Where are the lines between content provider and political advocate?

- Listing university affiliations: I do it if there's a real connection with my scholarly expertise
- One participant was on a City of AA energy and climate commission (in a previous job not connected to the university). He sponsored an initiative to have the city divest from fossil fuels. He now works for UM, but remains involved in the initiative. When he testifies, he states "who I am, here's my background, but I am not representing UM in any form."
- Where is the risk line? When can I stop saying 'I don't speak for the UM'?
- Distinguish your views "as a scientist..." and "as a citizen..." - but what do you do when you have an opinion about an issue as a scientist? Example: James Hansen and climate change.
- Academics tend to be too nuanced, not good at sound bites
- Should one advocate a vote for a particular bill? Academics don't usually do this, but industry advocates do
- Classic academic answer: it depends....
- Leopold Center, U Wisconsin, has a good training program on how to communicate about climate change
- University advocates open discussion, free speech – we must protect this. It's the real purpose of tenure.
- Content formulation and outcome formulation are going on at same time.

- Legitimacy: related less to whether your research is outcome-driven, more to how honest you are with your evidence, and how well you follow rules of logic

What is the role of the Humanities in this issue?

- Much of this conversation has focused on the physical sciences, and to a lesser degree, the social sciences. But the humanities have a critical role to play. They help us see these issues as human issues, as having direct connections to elements of our culture that may go back centuries, and may have impact on our culture going forward. For example, climate change requires that reassess who we are as humans and what our role is within the environment (i.e. the Anthropocene).
- A similar argument can be made for the fine arts in helping us to appreciate the import of the great issues of our day.

**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS POSTED ELECTRONICALLY:**

*1. What themes did you find most important through discussion in the first brownbag?*

- What is rewarded by the academy? Trying to grapple with our roles as citizens vs. academics (are they able to be truly separated)? Do we have an obligation to educate the public, lawmakers on our work?
- Questions about audience and authority.
- I am most interested in the process of communicating research (generally, not just scientific) with the public and how to engage the public in the process of doing research. I think social media is important and interesting but I would also like to consider ways that researchers engage the public by having them help with research projects. A discussion of how the academy rewards public engagement is also very important.

*2. What kinds of themes would you like to discuss in future brownbag lunches?*

- I would like some practical discussion of ways that we can communicate more effectively. For example, points about what the media is trying to achieve that can guide us in developing more appropriate sound bites. Arthur Lupia may be a very good person to discuss this.
- I would be interested in practical training related to how to be effective in media interviews or how to get op eds accepted for publication. I would not be interested in attending any more discussions about university policy regarding whether public engagement should be rewarded, etc.
- Practical concrete examples from colleagues would be welcome. When, how to shape messages. What institutional support or training is there/could there be for public engagement?
- I am most interested in engagement that involves joining together, being involved, participating -- this definition of the word implies a two way street. Who are the partners in "academic engagement"? The public was implied in the first brown bag, but it might be interesting to think about who this public is and how we engage different "stakeholders."