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Isolated Scholars: Making Bricks, Not Shaping Policy

By Andrew J. Hoffman

In last month’s State of the Union address, President Obama sounded the alarm on climate change, pausing to enumerate his administration’s accomplishments but also underscoring the problems that lie ahead. Though his speech encompassed myriad issues facing the American public, Obama emphasized that "no challenge—no challenge—poses a greater threat to future generations than climate change."

His comments follow years of political inertia on the issue, despite scientists’ increasingly bleak predictions. This lack of political will prompted the president to appeal to the room full of policy makers to heed the scientific consensus on climate change and take decisive action, recalling to them their responsibility to take seriously the expert testimony of the research and academic communities.

Yet, just as the members of Congress have an obligation to listen to the informed advice of researchers and scholars, so too do academics have a duty to make themselves heard in the public and political spheres, inserting their voices into debates where expert knowledge can move the conversation forward. Unfortunately, the present culture of academe often runs counter to this kind of open and accessible engagement, to the detriment of both the voting public and the academic community.

One reason for this disconnect is that academe has become a field of "brick makers." This was the theme of a letter by Bernard K. Forscher published in Science magazine in 1963, and his critique, in the form of a parable, is even more relevant today. Forscher lamented that academic scholarship had become fixated on generating lots of pieces of knowledge—bricks—and was far less
concerned with putting them together into a cohesive whole. In time, he said, brick-making had become an end in itself. Indeed, his metaphor aptly depicts today’s reality.

Academic success lies in publishing academic journal articles that make incremental contributions to theory, not in summarizing the broader contributions of the community of scholars. Specialization, not generalization, is the signal of academic rigor. The conventional rules of academic tenure and promotion steer all in that direction. With some notable exceptions, few social scientists are building an edifice, telling a whole story as it presently exists, and deciding what new pieces of information (bricks) may be necessary to tell the next chapter in the story.

It is time for that to change. It is time to build the wall from the large and growing body of research in the physical and social sciences on a host of issues: not just climate change, but also nanotechnology, nuclear power, autism and vaccines, GMOs, and more. Academic scholarship can and must enter more fully into the national debate on these issues, and other academics must build on that scholarship.

Not only must collective academic knowledge be accumulated in this way, it is equally crucial that it be made available and accessible to an educated public that can put the insights of this research to use. Again, this is not something for which academe rewards scholars and scientists. Academics are encouraged to build bricks that are used—or more accurately, cited—by other brick-makers. The predominant focus on A-level journals feeds what some have called our "theory fetish," in which practical relevance takes a back seat to theoretical rigor, and empirical evidence is used to inform theory, not the other way around. Russell Jacoby, a professor of history at UCLA, warns in his 1987 book *The Last Intellectuals* that the increasing insularity of individual academic fields "registers not the needs of truth but academic-empire building." Academics find themselves talking to ever smaller and narrower academic audiences, using a language that educated readers do not understand, publishing in journals they don’t read, and asking questions they don’t care about. Whether this work actually creates real-world change is a question
that is rarely, if ever, asked.

A 2013 faculty survey at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor found that 66 percent believed that external engagement was complementary to their academic research, 34 percent believed it was downright dangerous (as it was often misquoted), and 41 percent believed it was time-consuming and distracting.

This, I believe, is dangerous—for both society and higher education. One of the reasons (among many) that the public discourse on critical scientific issues of our day has become so confused is that too many academics, according to a 2014 study by John Besley in *Science and Public Policy*, do not see their role "as an enabler of direct public participation in decision-making through formats such as deliberative meetings, and do not believe there are personal benefits for investing in these activities." And yet if society is to make wise choices, those who create knowledge must move it beyond the ivory tower.

The role of the academic scholar in society is in flux today. Social media is "democratizing knowledge," allowing all forms of "research" to enter the public discourse and influence the democratic process. At the same time, state legislatures are cutting funds to higher education and there is a growing distortion of the research agenda by funding sources with specific interests. Against this backdrop, academic researchers can continue to write for specialized journals, but in so doing they become further relegated to the sidelines. To revitalize their fields, they must embark on a new effort at public engagement, embracing, as the Berkeley sociologist Michael Burawoy explains, "the necessity and possibility of moving from interpretation to engagement, from theory to practice, from the academy to its publics."

The problem is that many excellent scientists lack the skills, time, inclination, or incentives to play the role of educator to the general public and political leaders, especially when faced with an apparent lack of interest on the part of the broader public. As the prevailing logic goes, academic scholars develop data, models, and conclusions and expect the public and politicians to accept those conclusions because the scholars' methods and interests are
established within their communities and should not be questioned. But knowledge is never socially or politically inert, particularly when it results in changes in the way people live their lives, and academic scholars have a duty to both recognize the impact of their work on society and communicate that impact to those who must live with the consequences.

In the end, whether any scholar can succeed in the goals of constructing buildings from academic bricks and using that work to reach a broader public is up to the scholar and the community of readers. Success will be measured not in citation counts but by the extent to which scholarly research changes the way people think about the problems we face and their solutions. The actual metrics for the attainment of that success are anyone’s guess. But that should not discourage those who wish to make an impact beyond the campus walls.

Andrew J. Hoffman is a professor and director of the Erb Institute for Global Sustainable Enterprise at the University of Michigan. This essay is adapted from his book How Culture Shapes the Climate Change Debate (Stanford University Press, 2015)
Knowledge is not divided so simply into these separate compartments.

Patriot • 8 days ago
I do love how the author assumes "climate change" as a key topic for academics to engage in. Perhaps he should take a look at what happens when academics criticize the so-called "consensus" on climate change. "First, we will give him a fair trial, then we will hang him."

jsryanjr • 8 days ago
Public policy is different from science. Many scholars are not adapted to it and will find it hard, but some who are liberated by academic success (and tenure) will make the transition to the more comprehensive problem-solving that public policy engagement requires. It's okay that not every academic tries to become a public-policy guru.

The more common problem is not being able to see the forest for the trees: leaping from successful specialized studies (or the prestige of having conducted them) to conclusions and influence on public policy, when the specialization by itself doesn't address vital aspects of the public interest. (The comment by aloofbooks about multidisciplinary knowledge is relevant here.)

It's best to see the value in both specialist and comprehensive problem solving and not force (or accept) folks into roles where they may not fit.

whitesquall → jsryanjr • 8 days ago
I agree. The critique of the brick maker is justified to some extent, but we are scholars! Our knowledge is deeper than the political expediencies of the time. We are neither soldiers nor CIA and cannot be bullied into action. THAT is dangerous and anachronistic, a throw back to 20th century totalitarian politics! We should feel free to share our knowledge, engage in public debate as the SSN mentioned below, but it is dangerous to demand pre-fab politically motivated sloganeering from us. Fast food, fast politics maybe, but fast scholarship is not possible! Then we will really be reduced to brick workers for the government. Do you want that?

Seph → whitesquall • 6 days ago
They are not political expediencies, but rather political realities and you, I think, put too fine a point on the notion of being conscripted to play a part in (what you think is) a farce or drama. Because academics and scholars(!) have ceded the ground of rational argument and ethical contention over the political arguments of the day, you don't really participate in public debate because you are not regularly consulted or participate (instead journalists are). You certainly can share your knowledge, but those participating in that network of exchange are fewer and fewer by the day. We lost this ground back in the 80s and the scholarly trepidation of being relevant in populist discourse may be logical but the Humanities are dying and though it's not your fault, your attitude does not help.

Luisa S. Deprez • 8 days ago
I would encourage readers to look at the Scholars Strategy Network. This network, initiated by Harvard Professor Theda Skocpol, brings together progressive-minded university scholars to address pressing public challenges at the national, state, and local levels. As progressive-minded citizens, SSN members spell out the democratic and policy implications of their research in ways that are broadly accessible. They engage in consultations with makers.
in Washington, DC and state capitals. And they make regular contributions to the media, sharing research findings with journalists and bloggers. SSN scholars are also committed to working closely with advocates and leaders of citizen associations to come to better understandings of the nation’s social and political challenges. There are currently 19 active regional groups; over 500 members.

David Demers • 8 days ago

Andrew Hoffman • 8 days ago
For those interested in this topic, the University of Michigan will be hosting a conference called "Academic Engagement in Public and Political Discourse," May 13-15. Nearly 40 speakers including 5 University Presidents. The meeting is free, but space is limited and pre-registration is required.

Agenda, Details and the Registration link are here: http://graham.umich.edu/mm/

jaropa • 8 days ago
Well, this makes me think of "In the Afterlife of the Duke Case" (Wiegman, et al, _Social Text_ vol. 25 #4 93).

Part of the problem with making our voices heard is the public’s reception of information that might contradict and challenge their worldview. But, to be sure, another part is the notion that (and I'm quoting Wiegman et al) "right-wing organizations have succeeded in constituting themselves within the university as part of its social and political life" and that "Under these conditions, faculty who produce dissenting knowledge—whether defined as counter to ideological, corporate, or traditional disciplinary formulations—can be subjected to an imitation of the kind of scrutiny that generally goes with the commission of a felony."

jaropa • 8 days ago
[YaAAAAAAAawwwwwwnnn....]

Also difficult not to hear Darth Vader in there:

"You are part of the progressive-liberal Democrat alliance and a traitor! Take her away!"

Prickle • jaropa • 6 days ago
Oh. Is the smart progressive gonna make fun of me and my teeny little IQ? If only I had a gender studies degree like you... then it would all be so clear. But I just could never wrap my mind around all the contradictions. Ah, but you are so dialectical! You mastered them.
"But I just could never wrap my mind around all the contradictions."

That's too bad. Wrapping one's mind around all the little contradictions, around the complexities of life/thought/identity/culture is a bit like mapping a Mandelbrot set: up close you can appreciate that it is a rich and complex structure.

Of course, to the untrained and the unwilling, it's just a deceptively simple looking set of circles...

Prickle

Oh, is the progressive going to teach me how to be civil! YES! It is time for some codes in this comment section!

(oh, what is up with the analogy? that's more strained than mine was.)

jaropa

That's it? I was hoping for a stronger response a la living in a narcissistic fantasy world... Alas, Prickle, you failed to tickle my pickle.

J. Albert Bowden II

adopt openness as a culture and reap the benefits of open data, open source, open education, open textbooks, open science, and openglam, just to name a few. we should all be working together, for the common good.

lotsoquestions

I think there's an awful lot of elitism in all of these suggestions being put forth in the comments. Quite frankly, a lot of us don't teach at the kind of top-tier universities that would likely be represented at a roundtable at Harvard or Michigan. (I know because I've applied to some of these programs from my third-tier university.)

Faculty are just going to get more marginalized as they end up teaching multiple shifts at various universities as adjuncts, cobbling together a portfolio of gigs for regular universities and for profits, teaching courses which are billed as 'products' in various formats like weekend college and executive seminars and the like.

It's been my experience that the grad students in your program who came in as princes -- usually as the result of inherited status from a famous professor parent -- and went on to top-tier schools might occasionally be asked for their opinions on TV, but not usually the regular faculty, the rank and file individuals who teach most of the courses and do most of the research in America. The academic stars don't have this problem.

Lee Kottner

Exactly. If the public wants public intellectuals, they're going to have to start demanding that universities support scholars more securely than they do now. When 60-75% of your workforce works on a semester to semester basis unsupported in research and without the protection of academic freedom, it's little wonder we're busy making bricks. Stop the handwringing and do something about the root of the problem.
I am very suspicious about whenever someone tells me what I ought to research, or how I ought to do so.

This article raises interesting questions as to whether the (mostly public) university system is working at all. There is nothing wrong with “making bricks” for a living if there is a will to fund brick making (either through public sources or private sources.) If the brick making is publicly funded, then brick makers are accountable to the public. (If it is privately funded, then, sky is the limit.) The public has an interest in preservation of knowledge and creation of new knowledge, but it begs the question, what kind of new knowledge benefits the public good? The public has an interest in funding research that benefits society - not necessarily today, but eventually. Brick-making for the sake of brick making alone serves no public good, as far as I can tell.

Kudos to those academics that care about teaching more than their research, but generally, the goals of undergraduate education, to prepare students for the workforce and to be well-rounded individuals, (and it should for the price of tuition) is not consistent with the goals of academics, to research and pursue their own passions and interests outside of the classroom. So, when students pay tuition that funds professors’ salaries, they should be asking whether they are receiving excellent teaching in return, or whether they are mainly funding their professors’ research. So, just as students should be questioning the value of their investments in themselves throughout the public universities they attend, the public should be asking the same questions about the research that they are subsidizing.

Brings to mind frustrations regards academics diagnosis of education problems, but apparent lack of presence to the reality beyond the theories, in this piece: http://www.minnpost.com/commun...

Exactly how is this feasible? "Academic success lies in publishing academic journal articles that make incremental contributions to theory, not in summarizing the broader contributions of the community of scholars." Everyone is pushed to publish, but we should all be producing 'broad contributions'? How many 'broad contributions' do we need? What are you actually advocating for?

Isn't this the perspective of elite technocrats? "It is time for that to change. It is time to build the wall from the large and growing body of research in the physical and social sciences on a host of issues: not just climate change, but also nanotechnology, nuclear power, autism and vaccines, GMOs, and more. Academic scholarship can and must enter more fully into the national debate on these issues, and other academics must build on that scholarship." The Medieval church made similar arguments as to why they deserved cultural and political power.

I do not relate to this article. The public has access to our knowledge, and many
who are in academia communicate their knowledge and beliefs outside of academia. This article reminds me of students who expect me to put in every single rung of their educational ladder so that they can "succeed" when the burden of learning should fall on them as it should on the larger citizenry.

Colin Pugh · 4 days ago

Ah, this reminds me of Morris Kline’s issues with mathematics education. He saw the problem as this (in math):

1. Math professors focus much more on pure math research over teaching
2. Graduate students in mathematics have to work on highly theoretical mathematics with the professor, again privileging research over teaching
3. The graduate students/professors become so focused on pure math that it alienates them from their student’s position being confused with calculus/statistics. The professors and grad students can't relate or understand what a history or english major might be having trouble with when learning math because they’ve either never been in that position or it’s just been a long time.

His solution is one that I think can be applied to the problem highlighted in this article: Have three kinds of academics. These three:

1. Pure researchers who focus on expanding knowledge (brick builders)
2. Scholars who have enough depth of knowledge to understand breakthroughs, but also a breadth to understand it's context. The scholars job is to disseminate the bricks to the engineers and professionals (politicians, lawyers, teachers, etc)

traveloista · 3 days ago

I Think That's Right..

ikeRoberts · 2 hours ago

I wonder how different the results would be in a survey of Michigan State faculty rather than University of Michigan.

"External engagement is ... complementary to their academic research: 66% downright dangerous: 34% time-consuming and distracting: 41%"

For many faculty at MSU, external engagement is explicitly part of their academic responsibility. The value of their research is to a meaningful degree evaluated on how well it is integrated with external engagement and societal impact. Faculty in the applied natural sciences are expected to have a significant understanding of the relevant social science so their external engagement is effective.

Among our land-grant colleges, I estimate that there are at least 10,000 faculty with this expectation. That could be a powerful and influential group.