

# Making a Case for Media Engagement

*Academic Matters*, by Shari Graydon 18 May 2011

Scholars seeking influence should consider the opportunities afforded by the mainstream news media. The voices of academic women are particularly needed.

For three years in the mid-1990s, I had the privilege of sending a weekly memo to thousands of readers of the Vancouver Sun on whatever topic most concerned me. Although only a small fraction of them replied (often, it must be admitted, in language that made clear their profound disagreement with my position, syntax, or gender), it was such a deeply satisfying exercise that I occasionally still seek to re-live the experience.

Last September, in a fit of pique I confessed via the comment page of the Globe and Mail that like most Canadians, I don't have a PhD in criminology, statistics, or environmental studies, and I'm not remotely qualified to judge the validity of scientific research relating to the efficacy of mandatory minimum sentences, or the effect of mining development on the health and sustainability of natural resources.

As a result, I appreciate living in a country where education is a right, university research is well-funded, and world-class scientists boast in-depth expertise about everything from the impact of early childhood education on crime prevention to the relationship between greenhouse gases and climate change. And then I asked: What is the point of funding such research and supporting institutes of higher learning if the knowledge they produce is so often disregarded?

The reader response to my commentary outstripped even the biggest barrage of hate mail I had ever received as a weekly columnist (writing about the high suicide rate among gay teens prompted a deluge and, yes, much of the mail was accompanied by religious tracts). Last fall, my rhetorical question was aimed primarily at politicians who appeared to have abandoned all pretence at making decisions based on actual evidence in favour of partisan expediency. But it's my proposed remedy that I'm now hoping the

readers of this publication will take to heart.

## **CHALLENGING SCHOLARS**

Every week, dozens of news stories make clear the pressing need—in an age of Facebook, Youtube, Wikipedia, and Twitter—of serious scholarship. Public relations spin on the safety of a new drug begs scientific interpretation; mendacious campaign promises demand objective context; volatile international events scream out for informed analysis. And on the day I write this, the Globe's front page is profiling the effort of a prestigious medical institution to counter a social media misinformation campaign about the recovery prognosis of one of its patients.

Disinterested perspectives offering genuine insight are often in short supply. And there's no good reason for that. Canada boasts thousands of highly educated, extremely articulate and civic-minded scholars. Although many are listed in their institutions' expert databases, even some of those academics routinely decline to respond to media interview requests. And relatively few have ever attempted to craft and submit commentary of their own, providing informed context to the news of the day in a concise and accessibly written op-ed (placed "opposite the editorial" page) despite the fact that doing so permits writers both to control the message and enlighten potentially hundreds of thousands of people. There are lots of good reasons why university faculty members should overcome the resistance many feel about doing this. Reading the online chatter—on blogs, university-related sites, and the feedback trail on online news sources—it becomes clear why some scholars have a dim view of journalism. To cite one prominent example, readers of Margaret Wenté's column in the Globe and Mail operating without mitigating experience or alternative insight, might be forgiven for believing that today's university professors are lazy, overpaid irrelevancies who sip sherry, neglect students, and have no right to complain about an annual four-month holiday.

While it's true that the online chatter referred to above offers some articulate and persuasive counter arguments to Ms. Wenté's column, scholars could do more to challenge such views. But first and foremost, they'd have to stop abdicating the field of

engagement as beneath them.

## **RELUCTANCE TO ENGAGE**

Unfamiliarity with the form and process are key practical considerations, but there's invariably more at stake. Many scholars anticipate that providing commentary to the news media—either in written op eds, or through broadcast and print interviews—will lead to them being judged and condemned: for wasting their time on unimportant activity; for abandoning serious scholarship in favour of crass self-promotion; and for daring to speak outside the narrow field of research in which they can legitimately call themselves “expert.”

This last hesitancy is apparently chromosomally influenced. Speaking to a group of producers and researchers at CBC Radio's The Current last year, I was recounting the difficulty I had in the mid 1990s recruiting women who are expert in their fields to be listed in a directory for journalists. I thought I was relating a quaint historical anecdote, but they all sat there nodding their heads. Even in this supposedly post-feminist age, it turns out the most highly educated women in our society are still much more inclined than their male counterparts to say, upon being invited by a reporter to provide context, “I'm really not the best person....”

I'm told these words rarely issue from men's mouths—not necessarily because all men think they are the best person but because they don't automatically call to mind the three other scholars in the country who know slightly more. This may sometimes be evidence of lingering “chilly climate” experiences, and the feeling some women scholars have that they must be, as the late Ottawa mayor Charlotte Whitton once famously advised, twice as good as men to be taken half as seriously.

But it's also clear that time is a factor—for both female and male scholars. Notwithstanding the unfortunate picture painted by Ms. Wenthe and others, one online respondent noted, “Studies from Canada, the US, the UK, New Zealand, and Australia are consistent in the finding that professors work between 50 and 60 hours per week.”

It's not surprising that squeezing in unpaid media interviews or the time necessary to craft an accessible 700-word newspaper commentary that may never get published, aren't top priorities.

For women in particular, who still typically shoulder more of the burden of child and elder care than their male counterparts, the idea of taking an hour or more away from existing responsibilities to give context to a news story feels like just one more burden the rewards for which remain elusive.

And then there's the questionable appeal of trying to pack one's comprehensive expertise into jargon-free, 10-second sound bites or appear on TV without the benefit of the hair, make-up, and wardrobe attention that's been lavished on the host doing the interview. On this front, too, women remain slightly disadvantaged, at least on TV. (I don't know if CBC TV's fields emails about Peter Mansbridge's follicly-challenged state, but Wendy Mesley told me before she cropped her locks that her un-anchor-like fly-away hair always generated much more mail than her journalism credentials or the stories she covered.)

## **OPPORTUNITY FOR IMPACT**

Understandably, when tenure is awarded on the basis of scholarly publications in peer-reviewed journals, there must be other incentives to invest time in writing for the popular press. Two years ago in these pages, University of Toronto philosophy professor Mark Kingwell suggested one of these when he observed that “most academic work, especially in the humanities, is published for an audience smaller than a successful cocktail party, and the rest falls still-born from the press, ignored by citizen and colleague alike.”

Popular print, broadcast, and online media offer scholars the opportunity to share their research-gleaned insights and analysis with thousands—if not millions—of people. At a time when many faculty members believe they have little influence over the governance of their institutions, the public discourse offers a bigger playing field for those wishing to

make a difference. And scholars like Kingwell, University of Ottawa's Michael Geist, and Janice Gross Stein of the University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs, who regularly share their expertise with a broader audience by writing op eds, providing broadcast commentary, or blogging about emerging issues, experience significantly expanded opportunities as a result of doing so.

Impressively bilingual University of Ottawa sociologist Diane Pacom is a case in point. A past recipient of the university's President's Award for Media Relations, Pacom regularly provides commentary to CBC, Radio Canada, and other media. She describes this activity as "liberating"—a way to ensure that her work doesn't stagnate in a small world of abstraction but remains connected to the broader community. She enjoys the writing and presenting she does in academic journals and at scientific conferences, but she sees the popular commentary as a complementary means of disseminating knowledge. And although she's doing so in the context of an age of ubiquitous accessibility, she cites Marcel Rioux, her thesis supervisor at the Université de Montréal 30 years ago, as an inspiration.

"He was himself a public intellectual, and he modeled media engagement, not just as a legitimate avenue of intellectual discourse, but as a civic responsibility. Europe has much more a tradition of this," she says, arguing that for Europeans it's an accepted activity, not frowned upon or dismissed. Nor is it a remotely recent phenomenon. "Plato," she points out, "was walking around the marketplace in ancient Greece speaking to people every day.

Allowing that the life of an academic can be lonely, and the feedback cold and scientific, Pacom expresses appreciation for the instant and often warm reception that's greeted her public engagement, encouraging her to explore questions that she wouldn't have pursued in the context of her own more focused research. A sought-after speaker, she recently presented the President's Lecture at the University of Ottawa, described as intended to share the institution's "rich and varied research interests and expertise on issues affecting all of us."

At a time when the post-secondary education funding environment remains challenging, it's in universities' best interests to be investing in such outreach, demonstrating more actively the contribution they make to the community, and the relevance of their research to the society supporting them. And funding councils like SSHRC have recently emphasized their desire to support research that explicitly "improves and enriches the daily lives of individuals, groups and communities", and encompasses "outcomes which help to change thinking and behaviour in everyday life." The news media offer many opportunities to exert such influence.

Moreover, given the complexity of the issues we currently face—from the global financial crisis and the growing unrest erupting across the Middle East to world food shortages and antibiotic-resistant bacteria—we need more than ever to be hearing from those who are conducting research into the causes and consequences of our most pressing concerns.

This is particularly so, given the ubiquitous availability of frequently unreliable—if not deliberately misleading—commentary on the internet. In a Wikipedia world, where information is available at the click of a mouse, the academy's relevance will continue to decline if university scholars don't work harder to engage beyond their institutions or specialized fields. And although the web may appear to have diluted the power of expert commentary available in traditional media sources, Deputy Editorial Page Editor of the New York Times David Shipley recently argued that there remains "a desire for quality and fact-based opinion," differentiating between knee jerk blog posts and reasoned and fact-checked argument.

## **WOMEN'S VOICES ESPECIALLY NEEDED**

The perspectives of female scholars are especially important, because even though women now make up more than sixty percent of university graduates and work in virtually all fields, their voices remain chronically under-represented in many of our culture's most influential institutions and communication vehicles. Recent Canadian research documents that on the op-ed pages of major daily newspapers and on

prominent broadcast programs dealing with public affairs, female pundits and pontificators are outnumbered by their male counterparts by as much as five to one. Sarah Marinelli and Philip Savage of McMaster University analyzed a random sample of eighty op-eds in 2009 from the Globe and Mail and the Toronto Star, examining not only the gender of op-ed authorship but also the issues addressed and the authors' professions. The 80-20 per cent gender split was consistent in both papers and similar to the findings of a recent American study conducted by the Op-Ed Project.

Additional analyses of both these papers and other major dailies (National Post, Ottawa Citizen, Victoria Times Colonist) and several national broadcast programs (CBC's The Current and Power & Politics, and CTV's Power Play) conducted in May and November of 2010 and the first two months of this year by Media Action have found similar trends.

But women experience many aspects of life very differently than men do and have unique insights that, if shared, could benefit us all in numerous ways. As a growing body of research makes clear, incorporating a diversity of perspectives into decision-making results in better decisions. Corporations that employ women at the executive and board levels are more competitive, and countries that not only educate women but also make the best use of their contributions enjoy a higher quality of life.

In a global economy, Canada can't afford for knowledgeable women to confine their expert analysis to scholarly journals and conferences. The voices that inform public debate through prominent news media have an enormous impact on shaping public opinion and influencing public policies and priorities. Given the unprecedented economic, environmental, and social challenges we face, we need to be drawing on the expertise of the best and the brightest, many of whom are women. It's never made sense to access the intelligence and ideas of only half the population; it makes even less sense now.

## **A PLEA TO RESEARCHERS**

My own experiences as a columnist, occasional op-ed writer, and broadcast

commentator have permitted me to provide context, challenge prejudice, shift attitudes, and help change policies. In my commentary last fall, I made a case for the value of disinterested investigation, the power of aggregated research, and the benefits of multi-disciplinary approaches to assessing problems. And I closed with a plea:

... for scientists of all stripes to step onto the information highway in all its forms a little more often: to challenge governments and voters alike to demand that policies and spending be backed up by reliable and independent data.

On some level, it comes back to the falling tree in the forest dilemma. If a scholar's knowledge isn't shared beyond the confines of the academy, if she has something brilliant and insightful to say about a current event or pressing problem, but no one beyond the readers of the scholarly journals in which she publishes reads it, how can we justify such a profound waste of talent and opportunity?

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