The University as a 'Giant Newsroom'. The Uses of Academic Knowledge Revisited

By David Rowe

Abstract

Almost a decade ago I published an article (with Dr Kylie Brass) based on Australian Research Council-funded research[1] about criticisms in the media and public sphere of 'ivory tower' academe, and how, under pressures of 'relevance', 'accountability', and 'brand identity', academic knowledge was being progressively and institutionally encouraged to engage with everyday media discourse. In this and other articles on universities and public communication policies, we explored the ways in which the products of university-based academic labour were being increasingly placed in the service of wider public discourse, with some perils both for that knowledge and those who generate it. In the ensuing years, these pressures have intensified in tandem with the marketization of higher education and the often-remarked hegemony of neoliberal managerialism. The decline of the mainstream press (certainly in paper form) and the rise of user-generated, social and mobile media have produced a more intimate and volatile relationship between universities and the media/public sphere. In addressing the subject of publishing and mediatization, it is timely to re-assess the uses and trajectories of academic knowledge, the technologies that convey it, and the implications for its producers.

The Academic and the Tabloid

My research in this area stemmed from a study of the changing nature of journalism and the media, especially newspapers, at the turn of the last century. It involved an interrogation of the tabloidization thesis, which broadly proposed that all news media were being transformed by a process which can be described in various ways as spectacularization, trivialization, and oversimplification. In more technical terms, it might be measured by changes in subject matter, register, textual size, visuality, headline size and content, and so on (Goot & Griffen-Foley, 2011; Rowe 2011). This research prompted a line of investigation concerning the relationship between university-based academic knowledge and labour and that of the media and journalists. At that time, academics were being increasingly called upon to venture outside their 'ivory towers' and to contribute to and enrich wider public debate. How their textual product (especially in my broad field, the social sciences and humanities) could be adjusted to the demands of, and play within the media, was uncertain. These questions were especially pressing given the aforementioned turn towards the tabloid, as well as the unaccustomed hostility and incivility of some journalists towards academics, especially those of a right-wing disposition who regarded academics as publicly-funded left-wing agitators (See, for example, Cater 2014). This 'mobile' environment involves a relatively stable, specialist, peer-reviewed zone of academic knowledge coming into contact with a rapidly shifting, uncertain domain of general discourse that may involve the discursive equivalent of 'hand-to-hand' combat. It also produces tension over universities encouraging public communication by academics while seeking to prevent and control any reputational damage or uncomfortable controversy occasioned by such interventions in the public sphere.

This shift also involves understanding a potential move in the direction of mediatization, which is sometimes conflated with the more routine concept of mediation (Couldry 2008). Published academic knowledge is always mediated, usually within the established genres of journals and scholarly books. The same process, after 'translation' and customization, occurs when it is situated in the wider media, either through academic authorship or journalistic interpretation. But mediatization is a more thoroughgoing effect produced by engagement with the dominant, routine processes of the institution of the popular media. Rather than taking academic knowledge and processing it, mediatization describes the impact on the formation and articulation of that knowledge at the point of production. Mediatization may mean that academic research and scholarship that is deemed to be media friendly and popularly digestible is institutional-ly favoured (a case of the university acceding to a combination of media and government pressures regarding its intellectual priorities) over intellectual activity seen to be obscure, irrelevant or, in deference to an adjective that has taken on an

increasingly negative connotation, 'elite' (Flint 2003). Such a framework is usually based on a conception of utility. Thus, mediatization is the process by which such knowledge is fashioned or influenced by media imperatives, anticipating topics, approaches, explanations, arguments, interpretations, predictions, recommendations, and so on. This process is frequently caught up with the so-called 'impact agenda', whereby the presence in the media of academic discourse and data can be interpreted as a measure of intellectual efficacy.

Academic knowledge can be projected into the media sphere through orchestrated public communication of research findings, or 'extracted' from it by the media for a range of purposes. The latter can be regarded as a positive indication of universities enriching the quality of public debate through provision, circulation and exchange of theoretical, conceptual and empirical knowledge, but more negatively it can involve a sometimes-virulent attack on the value of certain types of knowledge and on those who produce it. In Australia, for example, there is a well-practised routine among the tabloid media of ridiculing research grant announcements, especially those in the humanities and social sciences, which are regarded as a waste of public money and/or politically biased (Lamberts & Grant, 2016). One apparent tactic of the Australian Research Council in response is to cease publishing the titles of successful grants independently of their 100-word descriptions (See, for example, ARC 2016). This tactic is clearly designed to make it more difficult for hostile journalists to trawl through research project grant lists and to pluck out research titles that they wish to attack, without at least some prospect of contextualization.

The 'Ig Nobel Prizes' (Improbable Research 2017) are a playful take on this phenomenon:

> The Ig Nobel Prizes honor achievements that first make people laugh, and then make them think. The prizes are intended to celebrate the unusual, honor the imaginative—and spur people's interest in science, medicine, and technology. Every year, in a gala ceremony in Harvard's Sanders Theatre, 1200 splendidly eccentric spectators watch the winners step forward to accept their Prizes. These are physically handed out by genuinely bemused genuine Nobel laureates.

The focus here on science, medicine, and technology has generally, though, meant greater indulgence by the media than would generally be extended to the humanities and social sciences. For example, the conservative UK broadsheet, *The Telegraph*, appears quite tolerant of scientific eccentricity in its coverage of so-called "silly science":

The government has unveiled plans to allocate research funding according to how much "impact" the research has.

The plans have come under fire from academics, who say that curiosity-driven, speculative research has led to some of the most important breakthroughs in scientific history, including penicillin, relativity theory and the theory of evolution.

More than that, though, it might bring an end to the quirky, sometimes daft, sometimes weirdly inspired research that brings harmless entertainment and occasional enlightenment to armchair boffins and science nerds everywhere (Chivers 2009).

This kind of discovery-based scientific research is treated rather differently to theoretical or applied social science research, some of which ventures directly into the sphere of politics. For example, the tabloid *Sydney Telegraph* and its Melbourne counterpart, the *Herald Sun*, engage in ritualistic condemnations of "pointless", "loony", and "absurd and obscure" research (Bita 2016; Bolt 2004; Loussikian 2017). In response to such hostility, universities and their academic knowledge workers seek to use the media as a vehicle for demonstrating the relevance and value of their work (Johnstone & Moffat, 2017). However, as is clear from the above the examples, this may not be a congenial intellectual environment. Even if it is handled more sympathetically, it is possible that academic research and scholarship may be oversimplified, the implications of findings prematurely fixed or inadequately contextualized. While it might be suggested that such outcomes are less likely in so-called 'quality' newspapers and media outlets, the financial and organizational pressures visited upon them have both introduced a degree of 'tabloidization' (Rowe 2010) and a reduction in resources, especially of journalistic personnel, that have impaired the media's capacity to conduct sophisticated, critically reflective treatments of academic knowledge. One way of dealing with this problem, and which does not rely as heavily on media releases and regular journalistic contacts, is to use the now-available digital technologies to create customized public communication.

This was not a readily available option when the original 'Uses of Academic Knowledge' research was conducted at the turn of the 21st century. At that time, for example, analogue technologies and paper formats were more prominent; Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other social networking media platforms were yet to materialize; blogging was less ubiquitous; Wikipedia was still in its infancy; YouTube was yet to be acquired by Google, and mobile media, especially smart phones, were relatively underdeveloped. Importantly, the barriers to

entry of establishing professional-looking news and opinion websites, especially those not attached to major newspaper mastheads and broadcast corporations, were considerable. By the end of the first decade, new, relatively 'open' ways of communicating academic research to large, dispersed and heterogeneous publics—in other words, a potentially mass mediated process—had become available. At the same time, Creative Commons licensing had emerged to ameliorate disputation over copyright. Of particular interest to this article is *The Conversation*, a not-for-profit media entity founded in 2010 and launched in 2011 to operate as a "communications intermediary" (Landrum 2017) between intra- and extra-mural knowledge environments.

Academic Conversations

The Conversation was conceived in Australia around 2008 in a dialogue between a University Vice-Chancellor (Professor Glyn Davis of The University of Melbourne) and a former newspaper editor (Andrew Jaspan, who had edited newspapers including *The Melbourne Age*, and the UK's *The Observer* and *The Scotsman*). In sharing a concern about the quality of information and debate in the media, Jaspan devised the notion of merging the university and academe:

> "Why don't I just turn this university into a giant newsroom? Why don't I just get all these incredibly smart people within their various faculties to become journalists and write for the public?" (quoted in McAmish, 2013).

The publishing model relies on a ready supply of donated academic labour (no non-staff authors are paid) and funding support from member universities, partner governments and corporate sponsors, with no advertising revenue within a Trust ownership structure. Using a customized digital platform written in an open-source code, contributors, who must be affiliated to an accredited university or research institute, work with editors in real-time collaboration, and must agree to 'sign off' on the final published text. There is mandatory disclosure of any funding and private interest in the subject of the article. Once published, the article can be re-published without charge on the condition of appropriate attribution, and the author is able individually to track, via a dashboard, the numbers of readers, major re-publishers, and the main countries and regions in which each article's readers are located, as well as comments, re-tweets and Facebook/Instagram shares. Intra and inter-institutional analytics are also provided. Apart from Australia, *The Conversation* (2017a), the motto of which is "Academic rigour, journalistic flair", now has Africa, Canada, France, Indonesia,

United Kingdom and United States editions, as well as a Global one, which are freely accessible to all readers. As of May 2017, it had 5.2 million on-site users and a reach of 35 million, including republication (*The Conversation*, 2017b). The Australian Twitter News Index (ATNIX), which tracks the sharing of articles from Australian news and opinion sites on Twitter every month, regularly registers *The Conversation* as Australia's most-shared opinion site, and it ranks highly among all news websites (see, for example, Bruns 2017).

Turning a "university into a giant newsroom" may be regarded, if it occurs, as a clear case of the mediatization of academic publishing. Of course, this is a rather misleading description—news generation may be part of what a university does, but, in contrast to media organizations, that is not its main task. Indeed, apart from the key activity of teaching—itself a form of knowledge dissemination and, given the increasing size of student cohorts, of public communication—university newsroom activity is dependent on deep, long-form research and scholarship that is rarely evident among newspapers, broadcasters or website hosts. Less ambitiously, *The Conversation* model is characterized by a non-commercial relationship that aspires to integrate university and media activities. This development may lead to something of a breakdown in previously clear divisions of labour, especially when articulated with the aforementioned impact and engagement agenda that has spread out from the UK, where it first took root (Stern 2016). For example, it may lead some academics, as in the case below of a testimonial in *The Conversation's e-newsletter* (Valadkhani 2017), to combine elements of personal and organizational promotion, and media fund raising:

> Hello. I'm Abbas Valadkhani, and I'm an economics professor at Swinburne University. Last year I wrote a piece for *The Conversation* on my research on the profits big banks make when they delay passing on interest rate cuts to customers.
>
> Parliamentarians directly made reference to my work at a Senate Committee inquiry when questioning the CEOs of the big four banks, just hours after my article was published.
>
> It's impact like this that makes it worthwhile for researchers to publish with *The Conversation*. Today's newsletter includes some of the other stories that have had a real impact. If you think that matters, please support *The Conversation* with a tax-deductible donation.
>
> And if you're one of the 2,000 people who have donated already, thank you so much. By donating to *The Conversation* you've helped my research have a real world impact (Valadkhani 2017).

Although it is quite usual to endorse a text—for example, a 'blurb' for a book or journal - the enlistment of academics to help raise funds for a media organization in connection with promoting research impact suggests here that publishing and mediatization may take many forms. There is much to commend this developing relationship along the lines of the not-for-profit *Conversation* model—not least the provision of a public good for activity that is mostly publicly funded, and the geo-social spreading of readerships—but there are some sceptical questions that need to be raised in three areas of practice: mediatization, public labour exploitation and appropriation, and duty of care.

Conclusion: A Meeting of Mobile Minds and Media

In the Uses of Academic Knowledge research, consideration was given to what happens to that knowledge in the hands of the media. This reconsideration has addressed what might occur when the university is turned "into a giant newsroom", and media protocols and routines become everyday aspects of academic knowledge production and information. Impact is at the heart of these questions. It may involve a variation on the more traditional conception of 'opinion leadership' through, for example, exercizing influence through a hierarchy of credibility (Becker 1967) and knowledge legitimacy. Alternatively, impact may be measured according to a more conventional media market dynamic—readership size and, in a recursive loop, media interest and response. In both cases, the influence on knowledge production may deter certain kinds of academic practice, such as that which does not have obvious utility (i.e., 'pointless', 'absurd and obscure', and so on), is arcane, or condemned as systematically biased (Thomas 2014; Webster 2013).

Second, there is a matter of labour. Pressure on academics to be engaged in public communication involves a movement from discretionary activity to expectation. This activity, as noted above, entails the supply of media content ('news and views'), sometimes for a fee, but more often without charge not only to a not-for-profit outlet, but also via Creative Commons to commercial content aggregators and media organizations that otherwise pay for such content via an employed or freelance workforce. The issue of workload and work expectation is front of mind for academics required to juggle higher student:staff ratios, performance management and task inflation. Ironically, it is increasingly an issue for journalists in de-populating newsrooms being required to process greater and more diverse content. Thus, the implications for academic labour of the (still limited) mediatization of universities are not neutral or negligible. This development requires the acquisition of skills and the allocation of time under conditions of hyperactivity and relative scarcity. Given the university's many

constituencies and responsibilities, mediatization requires some reconsideration of public funding priorities and institutional autonomy.

Third, and this not an argument for insulation academics from the external world, it carries with it risks of public excoriation and ridicule. This reaction goes further than a conventional tabloid media antagonism towards the academy. In a digital world of intense contest over 'eyeballs' and the monetization of media content (Hutchins & Rowe 2012), there is heightened objection among commercial media organizations (most notably the Murdoch-family owned 21st Century Fox and News Corp—see Murdoch 2009) towards rival content providers that are funded by public funding or trusts. In Australia, for example, in the context of debates about reforms to media ownership and reach, a campaign has been waged by commercial media organizations over perceived competition from non-monetized knowledge, news and entertainment content (Meade 2017). Thus, academics publishing in public and not-for-profit outlets unwittingly become entangled in political conflicts over media share and so-called 'competitive neutrality' (Samios 2017)

Therefore, if academic knowledge work is to be mediatized, it is necessary not only to recognize this extension of the expected skills portfolio, but also for universities to afford some protection to their workers in the public sphere, and especially one in which social media communication is now central (see, for example, the case of former journalism academic Julie Posetti—Elliott, 2010). A particularly unedifying case involving a colleague was a vituperative attack on a colleague, Louise Crabtree (2017), who had written an article in *The Conversation* entitled 'Can property survive the great climate transition?'. In response, James Delingpole (2017), in the right-wing website *Breitbart* and via multiple syndications, republished her official short biography and wrote:

> This might sound like obscure, pseudo-academic, sub-Marxist gobbledegook. As indeed it is.
>
> It would be nice to console ourselves that this dangerous thesis was written by a left-wing research student of no account.
>
> Unfortunately, as Eric Worrall points out at Watts Up With That? there are people who take this woman's lunatic redistributionary jottings seriously.
>
> Her bio may raise the question—are we actually paying for this? (Delingpole 2017)

Although some academics (including Louise) might wear such online abuse as a 'badge of honour', it has the potential to cause considerable distress and harassment. This is a particularly acute problem for women, who frequently are subjected to misogynistic and even violent trolling for advancing opinions in the public sphere (Campbell 2016; Jane 2017; Rowe & Barcham 2014).

This point returns the focus to university public communication policies (as referenced above—see also Rowe and Brass, 2011), which have had difficulties with reconciling a desire for academics to be engaged in public communication and a concern to contain, via employee disciplinary rules, the incidence of damage to organizational standing, including bringing 'the university into disrepute'. This movement from publishing (in the broadest sense and incorporating public commentary) to mediatization needs to be recognized in the context of normative demands of relevance, extra-mural discourse, impact and engagement. Since the Uses of Academic Knowledge research was conducted and published, there has been considerable change in universities, turmoil in institutional media and an efflorescence of networked social media. Academic knowledge can and does travel a long way, with highly variable results. There is a strongly democratic intellectual bias in favour of this knowledge circulation and exchange, but the transmutation of the university into a "giant newsroom" is one form of mediatization that demands greater reflection on its consequences for the organizations that foster knowledge production, for those who actually generate it, and for the structures, meanings and uses of that knowledge as it flows across the globalizing digital landscape.

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Notes

[1]The research on which this article is based was funded by two grants awarded to David Rowe: 'When the Ivory Tower Meets the Fourth Estate: Academics and Journalists as Cultural Workers in the Contemporary Public Sphere' (University of Newcastle Research Management Committee Grant) and 'Disposing of the Tabloid? A Critical Analysis of Contemporary Developments in the Print Media' (Australian Research Council Discovery Grant - DP0208532). Thanks are due to Drs Peter Wejbora and Ruth Sibson for their research assistance on the projects, and Professors Colin Sparks and Toby Miller for their academic advice and strategic assistance.

[2]A small indicative quantitative content and qualitative textual analysis of four newspapers was conducted: two Australian newspapers, the (then) broadsheet *Sydney Morning Herald* and the tabloid *Daily Telegraph*, published by, respectively, Fairfax Ltd and the Rupert Murdoch-controlled News Limited; the UK broadsheet (then 'Berliner' size, and changed to tabloid format in 2018) the *Guardian*; and the USA broadsheet *New York Times*. The purpose of this exploratory study was to establish some of the explicit ways in which academic knowledge is used in the media (in this case, print, although much of the published material appeared online, often with some additional editing). The *Media, Culture & Society* article was not intended to discuss these data in depth, but merely to suggest the ways in which academic knowledge is openly used in the sampled newspapers, and briefly to observe variations that might suggest differences in the forms and uses of academic knowledge in different types and contexts of publication, as well as in the professional relationships between journalists and academics.

The sampling framework for this indicative content analysis involved 12 issues each of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Daily Telegraph,* the *Guardian*, and the *New York Times* on a 'rolling weekly' basis in 2001. The total is approximated given sampling decisions concerning what constituted an article (for example, separate digest textual elements were excluded). The study was conducted in 2001, before significant format changes to some of the newspapers (for example, the re-design and re-sizing to Berliner format of the *Guardian*, and frequent adjustments to the *Sydney Morning Herald*), but at an historical point when universities—certainly in Australia and Britain—began to be more overtly and systematically managing their media relations and media dissemination of knowledge (Rowe, 2005).

The content analysis identified the number of articles in which there was overt reference to, or input from, academics: 50 in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (2.9 per cent of all articles totalling approximately 1700), 22 in the *Daily Telegraph* (1.46 per cent, 1500), 60 in the *Guardian* (3.3 per cent, 1800), and 84 in the *New York Times* (4.2 per cent, 2000).

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