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Giving Faculty A Public Voice: Higher Education Must Incentivize its Faculty to Publicly Disseminate their Ideas

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Giving Faculty A Public Voice: Higher Education Must Incentivize its Faculty to Publicly Disseminate their Ideas

Cover Page Footnote

Writing for the *Times Higher Education* and taking opposing positions, Jeffery Flier, former dean of Harvard Medical School, and Sandro Galea, dean at the Boston University School of Public Health, commented on the limitations of how higher education can weigh in on public discourse. Flier comes out against university leaders becoming public intellectuals. He notes: “the skills, traits and accomplishments that elevate people to such positions rarely prioritise an ability or inclination to speak cogently and creatively on issues outside their domain of primary expertise.” In response, Galea remarks that even the concept of truth is coming under attack and warns “we are living in a moment of cultural and political transition, and academic leadership must change with the times, or be left behind by them.”

Especially in consideration of this volume’s theme, both of these points have great merit. Flier is right that it may well fall outside the scope of university administrators to carry out public debate, but that doesn’t mean that higher education needs to be left behind the times. Its institutions already employ people whose “domains of expertise” relate and speak to the threats of a post-truth world, and these people make up higher education’s faculty.

It is presumed that academic literature suffers from a dearth of an audience because of its subject matter. However, that subject matter has proven to have more of a potential audience than is usually recognized, and opening spaces within higher education to allow for more could significantly grow that audience. This could help a great deal in contributing to the milieu of information with which people construct knowledge for themselves and their communities. Whole careers are being made on social media platforms by translating Ivory Tower discussions into public discourse, and this is something to which higher education faculty are well-suited to contribute. In accord with Galea’s warning, Richard Lee has noted that the advent of free and equidistant knowledge is “one of the most important concrete developments” of our time: “the divide between the scholarly and non-scholarly is now facing a challenge.” It is incumbent on higher education to ensure that challenge is most productively negotiated.

A recent Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism analysis concluded that the issue with fake news “is only in part about fabricated news reports narrowly defined, and much more about a wider discontent with the information landscape.” This landscape is changing dramatically, and we can pair this with an anecdote from John Unsworth: “When my daughter Eleanor, now twenty-one, was about three years old, she had an imaginary friend. One day I asked her friend’s name. ‘Audience,’ she said. Today, Eleanor has real friends; it’s the humanities scholar who has an imaginary audience.” Unsworth wrote this to address the serials crises and advocates open access, but considering our changing information landscape the charge for higher education to respond to fake news calls for an even greater level of public engagement.

The theme of this volume suggests that higher education *must* respond to fake news, and we can concede that it may well fall outside the scope of university leaders to be the ones to do so, but still contend that academic leadership should keep up with changing times. Perhaps what they can do is help to start a movement to alter how academic output is credited towards career development. University faculty are most often incentivized to produce work weighed by the

self-referential metric of “impact factor.” This culls the audience for academic ideas by making them exclusive. Historian Marshall Poe has spoken of the need for academics to engage platforms other than journals and monographs, reminding that “we were born with watching listening organs. We don’t have a reading organ.” Of course the central issue, then, is one of incentive. It would be a significant change to how higher education operates, but fake news presents a significant challenge and is to be responded to in higher education by offering the best of what it already has: its ideas. The issue, then, is one of getting that message out most meaningfully and effectively. Incentivizing its faculty in their efforts to disseminate their knowledge is a great way to start.