Piet Bakker

Academia and "real life" – two different worlds?

Some years ago, I overheard a conversation between one of my colleagues and a student. "What do academics actually do?" the student asked, "They write articles, and go to conferences to talk about these articles with other academics", my colleague said. "And?" the student asked, "Well, that's about it", the academic replied, somewhat puzzled.

Academics – at least some of them – do more than that. Some of us are extremely popular sources for the media. If they are "suitable" and "available", as described by Herbert Gans in *Deciding What's News* (1979), they are used to explain developments, predict future events and provide media items with a general "seal of approval". On the other hand, it is not so easy for an academic, in particular from social sciences, to get research into the media. It lacks the "news angle", is too complicated or not recent enough.

Media researchers find their inspiration usually in "real life"; media policy, the portrayal of groups and minorities, the value of journalism for society, freedom of speech, the digital challenges for media, user-generated content, social media, democracy and the media, media use by young people… All of these and many more subjects lead to research but only occasionally this research leads to publicity in the media for the general public.

Too dull

That wouldn't be a problem if the research indeed would be too dull, too old, too uninte-

resting, too complicated and lack any form of newsworthiness. But I'm afraid that isn't the case. A lot of research is actually interesting and relevant. Academics are just usually not very good at making research visible, at "selling" their research.

Ten years ago, I left the University of Amsterdam to head the small research department of the School of Journalism in Utrecht. Some colleagues frowned at the change, and not only because of leaving Amsterdam for the provincial town. The "School" was considered to be a step down compared to a real University. But one of the things that convinced me was the research policy at the School.

It was rather simple and consisted of three elements. Research and publications should be relevant for the *community of practice* (media, journalists, government), for *education* (the curriculum, teaching) and for *academia* (conferences, publications). No minimum number of peer-reviewed articles in journals with a high impact number. It meant that we mostly stayed away from theoretical and fundamental research, and concentrated on questions that media and journalist had.

An important decision at the research group was to change *the order of publication*s. The academic peer-reviewed article was no longer the only thing that mattered. Research was published in all stages of the process, in trade magazines, presented at media-conferences, at other schools, at discussions with media or on our own blog. At the end a presentation at conference or publication of an academic article was a possibility.

This policy did not lead to less publications but to more. And to more visibility and better relations with our environment.

Piet Bakker, Professor of Journalism and Digitalisation, School of Journalism, Hogeschool Utrecht. Worked at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research (AS-CoR) until 2006, a former journalist.

Blogs and social media

Publications in Dutch were encouraged. This, of course, could be at odds with publishing in peer-reviewed journals. The rules on dissertations (demanding several published articles in peer-reviewed journals) means that PhD students have to publish in English, except when they publish a monograph. English is not off-limits, but the native tongue is encouraged. The logic of covering national subjects only in English always escaped me.

Blogging and the use social media like Twitter and Facebook substantially raised visibility and made research available to the community of practice. This is not only a publication-strategy but also a communication-strategy that fosters our network. There were complaints: ″That's a lot of work″. No, not ″a lot″ but it's work. However, compared to writing an article; writing a blogpost and sharing that on Twitter, Facebook and Linkedin is a marginal effort. The results, however, are much bigger than the effort.

We have a preference for *open-access journals* for publication. In practice this is not always possible, but even then, sharing content is not impossible. Some publishers offer the possibility to share up to 50 copies free online and I always send people the PDFs of published articles if they ask for it (stipulating that they don't share it online).

We try to do research *together with media*. Often, we need research partners for audience research, need ″real″ news items for tests or want to get insights in business models and new tools for journalism. We hardly use students as ″lab rats″. News media are interested in results, so why not engage them from the beginning on. For some bigger projects, we also have an ″advisory board″ with media representatives.

Teaching

Teaching is also practical work and being-in-touch with the real world. We don't employ researchers that don't teach. Academics often brag about ″not teaching″ or explain how they manage to get all their teaching done by others. Maybe people who don't want to teach should not work at universities.

We prefer *conferences in our own country* – or Western Europe – to large worldwide events. Going to Puerto Rico, San Diego or Kyoto means that your personal budget for that particular year is as good as gone. Building a network with researchers that target the same cultural and demographic area is much more valuable than discussing research in remote places in the world. What happens in Denmark in terms of media and journalism is much more relevant than the experiences of the *New York Times*.

We encourage researchers to *mingle with the real world*. Be a member of a vocational organisation, sit on Advisory Boards, speak at practitioners' meetings, be a jury member of a media prize contest. It takes time. Everything takes time. But it pays off.

So called research

Does this help? Does a policy of opening up lead to a better network, to more impact and more relevant research? I like to think so.

But I'm not always sure. Discussing results with the industry or sharing the stage with a practitioner can have side-effects. People might not agree, or your research is publicly denounced as irrelevant or badly executed. They might accuse you of living in an ″ivory tower″ and have no feeling for the real world whatsoever, they might question the fact that public money is spend on ″this so-called research″. They might attack you on social media. I could leave out ″might″ – it all happened to me.

It's the price you pay for leaving the ivory tower. But it's definitely more fun. And sometimes, expectations are just too high. After discussing the research that has been done on building a viable online business model with the editors of a national daily, the editor-in-chief concluded: "So, you don't know the answer either".

I happily biked back to my ivory tower.