

Extended abstract:

# Researcher and activist – marching for science and academic freedom

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The 22nd of April, 2017, was a special day, as large numbers of researchers joined a protest march through the streets of Oslo, Copenhagen, Stockholm, Helsinki, London, New York, Cape Town, Tokyo and Santiago. In 400 cities all over the world, academics joined the March for Science. Joining a demonstration certainly felt strange for those researchers used to thinking that there ought to be a definite distance between the researcher and the activist. However, arguing ‘science not silence’, many researchers took a step out into the realm of activism, of being explicit about how academic freedom is a cornerstone of any democracy and free society. This freedom is now increasingly threatened in several countries with the rise of political leaders who actively undermine both facts and scientific findings. As one of the demonstrating scientists put it: ‘For too long we’ve relied on facts and evidence to speak for themselves. That strategy has failed us. The March for Science is a coming-out party for a movement of scientists and supporters who are speaking out in the public sphere’ (<http://blog.ucsusa.org/guest-commentary/whos-marching-for-science-and-why-here-are-15-answers>).

There is an inherent tension in the role of researchers as advocates. It is often argued that those researchers who take a public stance on a particular issue may be perceived to lack objectivity, which may have implications for the general acceptability of their research. Some of the tension may arise from a belief that research is value free. But research is, of course, not neutral in its analysis. Even if it exhibits academic rigour and excellence, research is always shaped by the political context in which it is produced (Young & Quinn, 2012). What scholars choose to undertake research on and – perhaps even more important – what issues are ignored are significant here. As media researchers know very well, the concept of objectivity is not as straightforward as it might appear at first sight. It does not even necessarily mean the same thing from one culture to another, from one journalism to another, as scholars have found in research about different journalism education institutions around the world (Krøvel, Ytterstad & Orgeret, 2012). And central journalistic concepts may be understood very differently from one context to another – something clearly shown in a transnational research project on conflict and post-conflict journalism (Orgeret & Tayeebwa, 2016). As feminism has taught, there is also a lot of definition power related to accepted norms.

Global challenges do not respect national borders, and transnational cooperation is needed to find good solutions to them, be it climate change, refugee crises, corruption, human trafficking, war or terrorism. Just as cross-border journalism may be required in high quality investigative journalism, such as the Panama Papers clearly illustrated,

cross-border cooperation is also needed in research in many areas. The researcher–activist nexus is approached quite differently in different cultures. In many countries, PhD candidates are expected to end their theses with policy recommendations, for instance. On the other hand, last year the UK government tried to introduce an anti-advocacy clause into all grants that specifies that taxpayer money cannot be used to ‘support activity intended to influence Parliament, government or political parties.’ The clause has been hugely controversial within the British research community, and due to the reactions, it has not been implemented yet. However, it raises some interesting questions. For instance, if research needs to be engaged, how, specifically, will this engagement happen?

Some scholars do research because they have a normative point of departure – because they want to achieve something with their findings. When the present author undertakes research on the voices represented in news media, she has a clear idea at the outset that a multitude of different perspectives is a better way to approach the truth, that increased representation of women is positive from a democratic perspective. When she undertakes research on journalism in conflict societies, her idea at the outset is that peace is better than war, in most cases, and that media can positively influence reconciliation in the aftermath of violent conflict, just as the negative use of the media magnifies and promotes conflict. She conducts research believing that freedom of expression is better than censorship – that truth is better than lies. All scholars conduct research within normative frameworks, and these frameworks have an impact both on the research projects they choose to undertake and on those they do not want to pursue.

What happens, then, when findings are contrary to the researcher’s own norms or when findings may be used to promote a political view that the researcher heavily opposes? What happens if an analysis of Norwegian humanitarian NGOs’ communication strategies may be used by the current government to cut support to these organizations (something the author would not support)? Is there an increased danger that researchers will hide findings they don’t approve of, if they also have strong feelings about the topic? Or perhaps a more common challenge: that researchers will not go into certain topics because they are nervous about how their findings may be used?

And how do scholars select research partners – do they tend to go for like-minded colleagues? What happens when partners’ normative frameworks are completely counter to one another’s? It is when researchers cooperate with others who have very different normative premises than their own, that they realize it is not easy to make a clear distinction between the researcher and the human being (Orgeret, 2016).

It is very easy for researchers to talk past one another when they talk about advocacy. Surprisingly little research has looked into the topic of advocacy by scientists. John E. Kotcher is one of the few who have researched this field. His team (2017) asked the simple and relevant question: Does engagement in advocacy hurt the credibility of the scientist? They conducted a randomized controlled experiment to test public reactions within a specific research community to six different advocacy statements made on Facebook by an invented climate researcher. Using a spectrum of advocacy, from a purely informational statement to an endorsement of specific policies, Kotcher et al. found that study participants perceived the scientist as just as credible if he stuck to the facts, warned readers about climate risks or endorsed emissions reductions from power plants. When the scientist’s Facebook post advocated for relying on nuclear power, however,

he, interestingly, took a slight credibility hit. Kotcher et al.'s findings challenge the conventional wisdom that advocacy always comes at the cost of perceived objectivity. But attitudes toward advocacy also vary a great deal from one field of research to another,

So, finally, where does this leave media researchers? Is it their duty as researchers to advocate when something important is at stake? Or will they gain more credibility and higher impact by letting findings speak for themselves? It is increasingly important for media researchers to discuss what advocacy means and to find a personal comfort zone when it comes to fitting activism, advocacy and political engagement into their lives. To do so, they need to be transparent about their beliefs, values and opinions, and to discuss continuously where to draw distinctions between scientific research results and personal views.

## References

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