

## Science communication and the public intellectual: a view from philosophy

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**Abstract**

While science communication has become increasingly professionalised, philosophers have been far less active in, and reflective about, how we talk to the public. In thinking about the relationship between the ‘public intellectual’ and science communication, however, philosophy has some important contributions to make, despite the differences of content and disciplinary approach. What, then, can both these professions learn from each other about how to engage with the public - and the risks that this might involve?

**Keywords**

Professionalism, professional development and training in science communication; Scholarly communication

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A few months ago, via a panel at the Australasian Association of Philosophy annual conference, I realized a long-held, if admittedly modest, ambition: to get philosophers and science communicators in the same room, and get them talking.

The reason for convening this panel was a suspicion that science communicators have important things to teach philosophers about how to engage effectively with the public. Scientists, on the whole, have long since gotten their act together on how to talk to the public in a much more comprehensive and self-reflective way than philosophers. (If that claim sounds wrong to scientists who find their outreach work under-valued or discouraged by institutional pressures, remember it’s only meant to be a comparative claim.) To those of us working outside the sciences, science communication appears both impressively professionalized and generally well-received by the public. And philosophers, like scientists, need the goodwill of that same public — yet we only rarely engage with them. Socrates did his philosophizing in the marketplace, talking with anyone he met, until they grew sick of his questions and killed him. (I may be leaving out one or two important steps here, but that’s sort of the gist of it.) Philosophers today, by contrast, philosophize almost exclusively at the public’s expense, whether via taxes or tuition fees, yet spend virtually all of their philosophically productive time talking to other philosophers.<sup>1</sup> This “present lack of emphasis on producing philosophy

<sup>1</sup>There are admittedly a small number of successful philosophy communicators working outside the university system (figures like Nigel Warburton, Alain de Botton, and Damon Young) yet these tend to be either ex-academics or at least university educated to postgraduate level.

for the public,” as Greg Littman claims, “offends against the spirit of all of the major movements of academic western philosophy” [Littman, 2014, p. 105]. More practically, a context where little public understanding of or good will towards the discipline exists leaves philosophy vulnerable to political attacks and budgetary predations. Similar remarks can, of course, be made in regards to other Humanities and even some Social Science disciplines as well.

Yet ‘philosophy communication’ has barely even begun to be thematized by philosophers, and even when it is, there is implicit disagreement over what philosophers should concentrate on. Is the goal to increase ‘philosophical literacy’ among the public, or to actually advance public discourse, even on minor topics, using philosophical techniques and resources? Huss [2014] characterizes the difference as one between a pedagogical approach, designed to foster ‘philosophical literacy’ among the public — a form of teaching by other means — and an ‘applied philosophy’ approach. The latter does not just teach the reader something about philosophy, but rather “places the reader in the position not of a pupil, but of a fellow traveler, or perhaps an apprentice, participating in philosophical analysis and experiencing the power of philosophy to solve problems, debunk dubious claims, and achieve clarity” [Huss, 2014, p. 27]. While admitting the distinction is not a hard and fast one, Huss argues for an applied philosophy approach as better promoting philosophical *competence*, not merely familiarity with names and jargon, among the readership. Pugliucci and Finkelman [2014] also claim that the boundaries between teaching philosophy and *performing* philosophy are ambiguous, whereas Jack Russell Weinstein insists that “teaching people to do philosophy and doing it with them are two entirely different projects” [Weinstein, 2010, p. 5]. I’ve found in my own practice that this distinction, if blurry, does capture the different approaches required for different outlets and tasks. Some websites or traditional media forms require versions of philosophy communication — explaining the existing arguments or concepts for instance — whereas long-form articles and magazine writing tend to favor the public philosophy model.

At first blush, this distinction may appear to mark a key difference from science communication. The science communicator’s task is primarily pedagogical, even if commentators differ on the precise aim and scope of that pedagogy. Doing science *with* the public, in a way that discloses something new to the scientist as well as their audience, is far less common; as Pugliucci and Finkelman [2014] note, even ‘citizen science’ initiatives largely restrict the ‘citizen’ participants to the grunt work of data collection. Public priorities can of course be reflected in which research programs are funded or pursued, but strictly speaking that doesn’t of itself amount to the public taking part in the knowledge-generating activities of science itself. Science has fairly well-defined institutionalized mechanisms and internal norms, and public discussions and demonstrations are not themselves *part* of those mechanisms or governed by those norms. A David Attenborough documentary or a museum exhibit, or even the Huxley-Wilberforce evolution debate (or in our own era, Bill Nye The Science Guy debating Ken Hamm on the same topic — what was it Marx said about history repeating first as tragedy, then as farce?) may *disseminate* scientific knowledge but they do not, in themselves, *expand* it.

However, I think this distinction between teaching the public philosophy and doing philosophy with the public does have a particular relevance to science communication, as the figure of the public intellectual is, in many ways, more

## Public intellectuals vs communicators

performative than pedagogic. If science communicators are to be public intellectuals, they will therefore need to take heed of what this might mean for their practice. And here, at least, philosophers might just have something to teach back to science communicators.

Philosophers are at a disadvantage with respect to at least one key task of public engagement: reporting, articulating and contextualizing new findings. Scientists may rightly bemoan the media's tendency to exaggerate the significance, immediate utility, or reliability of new research results, not to mention having to pose for clichéd B-roll footage of staged white-coated flask-swirling and pipetting. Yet at least they have findings to report, progress to exaggerate. The news may get blown out of proportion, but there's news to tell nonetheless. Philosophers by contrast don't produce findings with the same sort of breakthrough immediacy, let alone solidity or general interest. We don't do press conferences. So *that* aspect of public communication is mostly foreclosed to us.

However, we can, and do, serve to put things in context. For instance, where an ethical issue arises — say, whether self-driving cars should be programmed to kill the driver or a pedestrian in cases where there are no other options — media producers, journalists, and commissioning editors often find it useful to call up a philosopher to outline the problem and explain the different approaches that might be used to answer it. That function really belongs more to the pedagogic approach discussed above. And it is also what a good deal of science communication seems to aim at: translating the contents of specialist literature(s) for the general public in order to contextualize issues, from dinosaur discoveries to space probe landings to disease outbreaks. The reader or listener comes away now knowing some of what *other* people — namely scientists — *already* knew.

The role of the public intellectual, however, is arguably different: not merely a one-way conduit between the relevant community of experts and the wider public, but someone who actively tries to advance the discourse. *Everyone* comes away knowing something they didn't know before, because the activity of the public intellectual illuminates things in a novel way. Science communicators can do this too, of course. Some of the best science communication around climate change for instance is clearly evaluative and normative, not merely describing what the atmosphere is doing but conveying the urgency of addressing it. Or think of Carl Sagan's meditation on Earth seen as a pale blue dot by the Voyager probe, ending with a call to cherish that speck all the more for its insignificance in the vast cosmic stage. Yet one can't help but notice there's something *philosophical* about that speech. And that is where the philosopher, for one brief moment, has the edge.

There is a long tradition of philosophers as public intellectuals, particularly in France. Instead of sequestering themselves in the university, figures like Camus, Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Arendt wrote plays, novels, reportage, and polemics. They ventured well beyond the armchair: consider Bertrand Russell and Jean-Paul Sartre's commission into the Vietnam war, John Dewey's work exposing the Moscow Show Trials, and so forth. That tradition has, however, largely faded from view. Academic philosophers have largely, though never entirely, vacated the field. Instead, the most visible contemporary articulators of philosophical questions — What is time? Why is there something rather than nothing? Can we derive

ethical rules from natural laws? — have been scientists, particularly physicists. Many of those same ‘rock star’ public physicists, such as Neil Degraffe Tyson, Lawrence Krauss, and even Stephen Hawking, have been outspoken denigrators of philosophy even as they engage in discourse that is, recognizably, philosophical in character [Stokes, 2017].

Philosophers might respond here by telling scientists to stay in their lanes and leave the philosophy to the professionals. There’s something to that response, but it’s also important to remember that the remit of the public intellectual (scientist, philosopher, historian, whatever) is going to be somewhat wider than their disciplinary specialization allows. The public intellectual’s role is not merely to impart specialist information, but to break new ground in a given domain of public discussion, and that will typically involve, as Paul Dicken [2015] notes, a far more synoptic view than academic research allows.

## Research and engagement

Academics are often rightly suspicious of that extra breadth afforded by public engagement; there’s an important disconnect between our self-conception as ‘public intellectuals’ and our self-conception as researchers. Academic training involves inculcating norms of caution and respect for disciplinary boundaries, but what we end up commenting on in public is often a very long way from our areas of specialization. (I was once asked on live radio, out of nowhere, why puree isn’t considered soup.) There is thus a standing risk of speaking outside our scope of expertise. Yet that disconnect can in fact also be productive, creating new feedback loops between our public engagement and our academic production.

My own experience provides a modest example of this. In October 2012 I published a very short (about 800 words) piece called “No, You’re Not Entitled to Your Opinion” on *The Conversation* website. The topic wasn’t in any way related to my academic publications, which up to that point were almost entirely about a 19<sup>th</sup> century Danish philosopher. But the piece, aided by its clickbait-y title and some fortuitous retweets, went viral. A typical philosophy journal article probably has, if we’re being honest, a readership in the low double digits. ‘No You’re Not Entitled. . .’ went live at dawn, hit 20,000 hits by bedtime, and thanks to a Dawkins retweet was over 40,000 when I woke up the next day. Four years on it is nearing the two million hits mark. It opened up opportunities to do all sorts of new forms of public engagement — talks, radio, television, magazine writing assignments etc. as well as periodic emails from some delightfully odd people — that would never have happened otherwise. At the time of writing, it has just been revisited in a Quartz article on the ‘post-truth’ era, resulting in more hits, more crank emails, more media interviews etc.

I don’t tell this story to boast, as this is really a story of random luck rather than merit. Rather, I want to report something curious: this public engagement work which started as an add-on to my ‘real work’ *has* impacted on my research in a positive way. I’ve begun producing papers on topics that have emerged from outreach activities; the paper you’re reading now is one such example. The debate occasioned by ‘No You’re Not. . .’ and the issues of public trust, conspiracy theory, and so on surrounding it made me go back and engage with the social epistemology literature and produce academic work-ups of ideas that had begun as popular pieces. Instead of simply popularizing academic ideas, I’ve also found

myself feeding ideas worked out in the public space back into the academic literature. Thinking of public engagement as one-way traffic, disseminating the fruits of research to a passive audience, turns out to be only half of the picture. The current flows both ways.

### The dangers of the public intellectual

However, we should acknowledge there are dangers involved in public intellectualism. The first is that while concerns about ‘dumbing down’ complex material to make it palatable to the public are largely overblown, there is a danger of failing to convey nuances of reliability. Presenting a claim without all the caveats, counter-arguments and so on that follow in its train can make it seem like matters that are open and contested are actually settled. (Of course, scientists more often encounter the opposite problem in public discourse: massively supported positions being treated as more tenuous or open to dispute than they really are. “Evolution is just a theory, you know...”).

Secondly, because the public intellectual’s work takes place outside the governing norms of their discipline, there is potential to make unjustified claims without proper scrutiny. Experts can thus start putting out assertions that aren’t warranted by the literature but inherit the gravitas of the speaker. Linus Pauling’s advocacy of high-dose Vitamin C had nothing to do with his Nobel Prize winning research, but his status no doubt gave his views on the topic an undeserved aura of reliability. And while science and pseudoscience are at least tacitly distinguished by the public at least some of the time, no such filter exists for ‘pseudophilosophy,’ because nobody has yet articulated what that might be. We use ‘philosophy’ interchangeably to refer to an academic discipline and a personal set of beliefs, which is why when you tell people you’re a philosopher a certain subset will reply by telling you that “Well, *my* philosophy is...”. Anyone who wants to tell you about “my science,” however, raises immediate red flags. So whereas the public have at least a reasonable capacity to differentiate Brian Cox from Christopher Monkton, it’s much less clear they know how to tell Peter Singer from Deepak Chopra. A ‘scientist’ is understood as a credentialed title in way that ‘philosopher’ is not.

Thirdly, and I think most significantly, public intellectuals risk reinforcing the “sage on stage” model of academic which, particularly in philosophy, has disastrous consequences. Philosophy has a stubbornly persistent gender problem. Philosophers as a professional class are overwhelmingly white, middle-class men. Women make up just 24% of permanent academic philosophy posts in the U.K. and 21% in the US [Saul, 2012], and 23% in Australia [Goddard, 2008]. Women enroll in first-year philosophy units at roughly the same rate as men, but drop out instead of completing majors [Dougherty, Baron and Miller, 2015]. The reasons for this are manifold, but it is increasingly believed the problem is connected to how we implicitly present the category ‘philosopher’ to students. There is a striking correlation between gender distributions across disciplines and how those disciplines rate innate brilliance as an essential component of their field [Leslie et al., 2015]. Philosophy is a disastrous outlier here, viewing raw talent as far more important than any other discipline. We thus end up implicitly reinforcing the outrageously false idea that philosophers are born, rather than made — hence you either are one or you aren’t — and all the exemplars of these ‘born philosophers’ students are presented with are men.

That doesn't mean men shouldn't be public intellectuals necessarily, so much as it means we need to both promote more women and people of color as public intellectuals. And we need to avoid ways of presenting the public intellectual as a sort of oracular figure, a font of Delphic wisdom rather than a product of training and ongoing hard work, and someone open to engagement with and learning from the public as an interlocutor. Some public intellectuals model that very well, others not so much. Socrates, one might add, was a fantastic exemplar of such an approach. They still killed him, though. Something to bear in mind.

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