

## Exploding the myth of public engagement as a 'good thing' for research careers

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The shibboleth 'science and society' is increasingly conspicuous within, and local to, a discourse of research/er praxis and identity and motivated by an idealisation of the research community as more intimately and proximally associated, even entwined, with the 'public' – its cognate needs and concerns – and therefore a vision of academics as custodians, or as will be argued, *curators*, of the 'public good'. For the majority of academics employed in state funded universities in the UK, Europe and other international settings, a commitment to fulfilling this societal role is motivated by a top-down insistence that doing so is intrinsically a 'good thing' and a part of paying back on the public's investment in new knowledge – where the public exists as principal patron and financier of academic research. Concurrently, academics' commitment (or choreographing) of societal connectivity, public kinship and reciprocity originates not purely and selflessly in the terms of responsible citizenship and in the context of being benefactors of a knowledge economy, but in the terms of being economically accountable and therefore occupationally survivalist. In other words, entering what Whitchurch (2012) calls 'the third space' of academic endeavour is increasingly less an optional, more a mandatory feature of the academic contract. Of course, this is not to discount the multiple members of the Academy whose aspiration to succeed as 'public intellectuals' and valued societal contributors, stems from unswerving (or self-sustaining) faith and ideological investment in the university as a 'public institution'. There are indeed, those who, borne of personal conviction and/or a sense of professional duty, commit themselves to a public-facing and publicly-integrated vision of academe; a vision antithetical to an entrenched, stubbornly enduring and pejorative declaration of the Academy – perpetuated by some, embellished by many – as publicly closed, disconnected, disinvested and epitomized by the allegory of the 'ivory tower'. Notwithstanding, academics are now requisitioned to proactively interact with their stakeholders, and what Neave (1997) designates, the 'stakeholder society', and find their identities increasingly organised, obfuscated and/or atomized by the diktat and whimsy of Higher Education policy (cf. Henkel 2000, 2005).

The efficacy of a public engagement agenda or mission for Higher Education, appears therefore somewhat fraught, caught, vacillating or perhaps even, lost, in-between the ardour of its academic apologists, the misanthropy of its academic detractors and the ambiguity of Higher Education management as lukewarm advocates. The resulting prescription is that academics should 'do' public engagement because it is simply and incontrovertibly 'a good thing' and furthermore because it reveals academics to be publicly interested, involved, responsive and transparent knowledge workers. However, we might, and probably ought to ask, how much the formalisation of public engagement as an academic duty has culminated in an ersatz 'performance', reducible to simulacrum or hoax; and conversely how much is dedicated to, and focused on, satisfying public needs and securing the public good? Simply put, how many academics are legitimately and proactively publicly engaged and how do they reconcile a proclivity for public engagement with what appears, widespread apathy across the Higher Education sector; not least where it is construed, albeit ambivalently, as a measure of performance?

In order to answer these questions and in an attempt to intentionally derail what habitually appear, unsophisticated, unreflexive and evidentially impoverished rationalisations, we set out to extract

from academics – frequently or intensively involved in public engagement – a rationale for doing and/or not doing public engagement and thereafter the ramifications or impact of being publicly engaged on academic identity and praxis. This paper is the result of such inquiry and reports on a series of qualitative interviews (n=40) with UK academics distinguished for their public engagement endeavours and including representatives across the academic hierarchy; subject disciplines; and different kinds of institution i.e. research intensive; teaching-focused; community-facing etc. Almost seventy per cent of those interviewed were accredited by the UK's National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement<sup>1</sup> as Public Engagement Ambassadors.

Our central line of questioning focused on respondents' own conceptualisations and enactments therein of public engagement and the impact of their being publicly engaged on their academic identity; praxis; career development; and career progression. Accounts, for the most part, coalesced around a narrative of academic public engagement being inhibitive and deleterious to research identities and careers. Respondents spoke of a lack of institutional interest, acknowledgement, incentivization and reward for public engagement; that their association with public engagement had diluted and despoiled their reputation as researchers; and had caused distancing from research activity where principal investigators and research managers exploited their public engagement status as an opportunity to off-load administrative chores. In the latter context, respondents own interpretations of public engagement were seen to be routinely contradicted or at odds with that of senior academics who understood it to be isolated and separate from research and who more often than not conflated public engagement with academic administration. Furthermore, respondents were highly dismissive of the notion that systems of research assessment such as the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF), advanced the legitimacy and status of public engagement as an academic pursuit, mainly for public engagement being perceived a 'soft' and less easily measured version of 'stakeholder' engagement – the latter synonymous with knowledge translation, exploitation and commercialization.

An overall conclusion, gleaned from these accounts, is that 'intensive' academic public engagement, into which we include the sub-qualifiers of 'frequency' and 'prominence', is in opposition and harmful to, and incompatible with, research focused academic identities and careers. A rationalisation for academic public engagement as an inherently 'good thing' for research careers therefore appears more rhetorical fancy or deceit than recognised truth.

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