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Smoke Signals

Plain speaking on public health

Why researchers have a duty to try and influence policy

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Very early in my career, I was invited to afternoon tea with the head of the Commonwealth Institute of Health at Sydney University, where I worked. The best bone china was produced and pleasantries exchanged. The agenda soon became clear.

He laboured into a parable about the difference between young and old bulls when locked in a small yard. He told me young bulls run hard at the gate, exhausting and sometimes harming themselves.

But old bulls are generally patient and placid. They always know the farmer will open the gate and they'll walk out and soon get among the pasture and the cows.

Young bulls should learn from old bulls, he told me.

I knew exactly why he'd called me. For some months, I'd been in the forefront of a small group of public health people who were confronting the advertising industry's self-regulation body with data about the appeal of Paul Hogan, who fronted the massively successful Winfield cigarette advertising campaign. Hogan's own TV program had huge appeal to children. The advertising campaign was, therefore, in flagrant breach of the industry's own guidelines and so needed to be stopped.

After 18 months of trying to ignore us, we won. We quickly discovered while the advertising industry could ignore our letters, going public turned 10,000 watt arc lights on the self-regulation farce. Over that time the media often interviewed us. A headline after we won said our slingshot had cut down the advertising ogre. Hogan said he'd been sent from the field for kicking too many goals. That was in fact our argument.

My "young and old bulls" mentor later told me he'd been tapped by the Vice Chancellor to tighten the reins, after receiving complaints from connections with the tobacco industry.

Then, and even today, there still remain large remnants of the attitude in universities that scientists and researchers should avoid talking to the media. News media are frequently disdained by academics as trivialising and superficial, something from which those with ambitions of gravitas should keep well away.

A long history

The roots of this go way back. In 1905 Sir William Osler a foundation professor at Baltimore's Johns Hopkins Hospital, warned against "dallying with the Delilah of the press". More than 100 years later, a 2006 report by the UK Royal Society noted 20% of UK scientists believed colleagues who engage with the media are "less well regarded" by their peers.

Public engagement was something "done by those who were 'not good enough' for an academic career". Those who did so were seen by some as "light" or "fluffy" and, wait for this, more likely to be women. While 60% of UK researchers wanted to engage with politicians about their research, far fewer (31%) wanted to engage with journalists.

The cocooned naivety of this position is quite staggering.

Knowing someone, but never meeting

Early in Nicola Roxon's tenure as Australian health minister I approached her after a talk she gave at a conference. "I don't think we've ever met," I said. "No, but I feel I've known you all my adult life," she replied.

This could have only meant she knew me through the media.

There is an abundance of research showing people get a huge amount of their information and understanding of health issues from the news media. Equally, most politicians and their advisors rarely read scholarly papers in research journals. They form their understandings of the issues in their portfolio in a variety of ways. But like us all, they are daily exposed to information and discussion about health and medicine through the media they consume voraciously every day.

I had an instinct about the importance of all this right from the beginning of my career and so quickly took to trying to get my research covered in the media; I gave high priority to making room in my day to provide commentary about the areas in which I worked.

Here, I quickly learned the constraints on time and space meant something richly nuanced and complex always needed to be condensed into just two or three sentences in print media reports, or 7.2 seconds in television news. When I started taking opportunities to write opinion page and feature articles, the access to my work and commentary on controversies in public health rapidly accelerated.

Visibility brings access

The visibility this brought opened many doors to senior policy advisors and politicians. I also frequently had the experience of dozens of people telling me across a day they had read and enjoyed a piece I'd written in a newspaper that morning, or a breakfast radio interview as they got ready for work. Most of these colleagues work in adjacent areas of public health and would have only occasionally read my research work in journals.

My own GP and other clinicians have often told me about patients who brought in one of my newspaper articles to ask about it. This was especially true about pieces I wrote on the risks and benefits of prostate cancer screening. This feedback inspired a 2010 book – Let Sleeping Dogs Lie?: what men should know before getting tested for prostate cancer. Colleagues and I published it as a free ebook and it's been downloaded over 35,000 times.

My 85 articles in The Conversation have been read over two and a half million times. Just two of them have together been read over 1.8 million times. By contrast, the most read of over 500 papers I've published in peer reviewed journals has been read only 150,000 times. Many are lucky to get even 5000 readers. Being locked behind subscription paywalls doesn't help.

Who are the 'influencers'?

A few years ago, colleagues and I researched the characteristics associated with peer-voted "influential" researchers. We invited all Australian researchers who had published 10 or more papers in particular fields of public health to name five Australian researchers who were "most influential" in each of these fields. We then interviewed the top five from each field.

Overwhelmingly, nearly all said they believed researchers had a responsibility and even a duty to produce work that might help shape policy and practice. Most of these were very comfortable in actively pursuing media opportunities to bring understanding of their work to the public. Those who weren't comfortable in the media were very happy for others to do this on their behalf.

This approach started with choosing research questions they hoped would provide strategically useful information to inform policy. Their approach then passed through the necessary steps of grant application craft to best ensure it was funded through the highly competitive National Health and Medical Research Council process that now sees only 17% of applications funded.

These two steps are meat and potatoes for all funded research.

But it was in post-publication behaviour where influential researchers differ. They actively promote their work – not just to other colleagues in seminars and conferences, but to the public and those who might act on it politically.

And after all, isn't helping evidence-based policy and practice the whole point of wanting to do the research in the first place? Why else would you bother?

Don't just 'stick to the facts'

Some critics of researchers with media profiles argue researchers should just "stick to the facts" in media interviews. Our study participants saw this as naïve because "people always want to know what the policy implications are".

A total of 94% of those we interviewed disagreed with the view it was inappropriate to express opinions in the media about public health policy. Journalists might begin with a research finding or an expert clarification of a new report. But they invariably then asked what needed to be "done" about the problem, typically by government.

Journalists and audiences would meet with incredulity any researcher who tried to end an interview when there were questions about policy reform "oughts", or claimed to have no opinion on what should be done. We expect those who know most about health problems to have views about what should be done to solve them and the courage to put these forward, even if they imply criticism of governments or powerful interest groups.

Speak up, speak up

Trump's recent gagging of all government environmental agency staff is surely the start of a process that will spread to government funded universities in the USA. There has never been a more important time for researchers all over the world to speak up about their work, it's implications and how societies and governments should act on it.

I've just published a collection of 71 of my essays and op eds across a large variety of public health issues. Like this column, the book is called Smoke Signals, and is published by the Sydney University Press imprint, Darlington Press. It's available in paperback or as an ebook.

This article will be the subject of ABC Radio National's Ockham's Razor on Sunday, February 26, 2017 at 7.45am.

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