

Rent-a-Gob: Academics for Hire

Written by Matthew A. Hill

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MATTHEW A. HILL, SEP 26 2013

Every academic has insecurities about their practice; are my research conclusions significant, am I a good explainer, and so on. Typically, and like other sub-categories of humans, we are better at some things than others. Another sign of insecurity we have is vanity, and we have all been victims to it, to varying degrees. Over the last couple of years I have been invited to speak on a number of radio and TV programmes (no more than 10), predominantly satellite. Due to nerves and a lack of knowledge in the specific topic requested to discuss I have declined. But not always. Who can systematically reject the opportunity to be called on to talk about a topic and be introduced as an expert? All those years of being locked in my office writing my doctoral thesis, then publications, and finally I have a chance to tell everyone what I know (even if it is not what my research is about but hey, I'm clever so it's ok!).

What has got me thinking about this subject is the role we, as academics, are asked to play in the media. We are the white coated experts required to dispense apparent pearls of 20 second segmented wisdom about a particular issue. Whether or not what we say is reasoned and intelligent opinion is another matter. That's the structure set-up as I see it; now add into the mix a group of people who want to be recognised as experts, and we have the potential for vocal bumb. I am not saying that academics who are experts in a field do not appear on the media and give reasoned analytical insight. What I am saying is that when those people are not available to appear on a satellite TV channel (maybe sponsored by a government) because they are on *Newsnight* instead, the slightly panic stricken producer is calling around looking for someone that vaguely has a connection to the topic. And this is the problem for me, the academic moves away from being the actual expert and becomes a commentator with the veneer of expertise, because they have a Dr. before their name.

And this is where I get to talk about US politics, which is after all what this blog is about. Like most people interested in foreign policy, I have been watching the situation in Syria and the actions and reactions by the varying international actors. I am no expert on Syria, or on US and Russian relations, thus I would not appear on a show talking about the subject. What I want from an expert is a discussion based on information that I do not have immediate access to, what is the historical context, who are the players involved etc. Effectively, I want insight. What I do not want is a rehash of all the news opinions in the Western mass media. It is like a Washington, DC analysis that you hear one think tank expert say and then you go to another think tank and hear someone else say it, and before you know it this becomes the accepted wisdom on the issue. And this is what I am seeing when I watch the news about Syria, and it is dangerous. The other week, on different news sources I listened, read and watched experts who in their comments seemed to me to default to their being only two responses for the US, UK, France etc. to respond to the killing of the civilians in Ghouta; either do nothing or bomb the Assad government's infrastructure. When an expert *de facto* perpetuates a dichotomous *them and us* I am worried because they are singing to the tune of policymakers. I want an expert to give alternatives, and when that expert is not an expert then the probability of offering sage analysis becomes limited.

Before I go too far with this criticism, it is not that I am blaming the population's short-termed understanding of international affairs on the vainglorious needs of the academic community. But maybe we should stop and think twice about whether what we have got to say adds insight into the discussion and educates before we start speaking.

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About the author:

Matthew A. Hill is a senior lecturer in International Relations at Anglia Ruskin University. The aim of this blog is to examine US politics and pick an idea not fully-formed and run with it to see where it goes. Sometimes it will wither away but other times it will inspire to think about the idea further. Your input is encouraged and welcomed.