

Rapid Fire: Are Political Scientists Irrelevant?

Written by Robert W. Murray

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ROBERT W. MURRAY, FEB 19 2014

The Rapid Fire element of this blog features concise responses to questions of interest from our roster of contributors. For this post, we ask whether Nicholas Kristof's argument surrounding the irrelevance of political scientists rings true?

Respondents: Dr. David McDonough, Dr. Stephen McGlinchey and Dr. Robert Murray

David McDonough:

Nicholas Kristof has generated something of a firestorm among academics, owing to a NYT op-ed that decried academia's lack of public engagement and policy influence. The piece offers a whole litany of complaints – including academia's reliance on “turgid” prose, “gobbledygook” writing, cultural disinterest in “impact and audience,” a publish-or-perish tenure process that favours “obscure” journals over public engagement, a general failure to adopt social media and other outreach tools, etc.

Many of my colleagues quickly went on Twitter, Facebook, and blogs to take issue with Kristof's argument, in a manner that itself seems to undercut his characterization of academia. Of course, there's nothing inherently wrong with calling for greater public engagement from academics, as a call to arms so to speak – in what I can only imagine was Kristof's original intent. Yet, as others have noted, there is also something unpleasant in how he went about it, not least the fact that many of his supporting claims are either misleading or lacking in context.

I wanted to refrain from simply reiterating the specific problems in his argument, as commentators smarter and more eloquent than I have already done so. One only need to look at some of the more trenchant responses from the likes of Steve Saideman and Edward Carr, among others

Instead, I wanted to comment on a closely related issue that I think Kristof's opinion piece usefully hints at – and that is the issue of policy influence. It's relatively simple to demonstrate public engagement by academics, as there are plenty of individuals who write op-eds, blog posts, and policy-relevant papers, have active social media profiles, or take part in public speaking engagements, among other activities, to the extent it's somewhat baffling that Kristof seems ignorant of them. It's a whole lot harder to gauge whether such activities have had any impact on the formulation of policy – an admittedly elusive goal that many of the more policy-oriented academics might hope to reach.

Simply put, to ascertain influence, both the public and policy-makers in government need to be receptive to any academic outreach effort. The difficulty of ascertaining policy influence should not be underestimated – a fact that likely makes it particularly tempting to infer such impact by citing individual academics and their respective contributions in terms of op-eds or blog posts. Such measurements provides at least some quantitative comfort to the otherwise qualitative (and often highly debatable) metric of influence.

To his credit, Kristof does acknowledge that political authorities in the United States might not even be receptive to academic advice. The same can easily be said of Canada. Indeed, Ottawa seems particularly disinclined to accept such input – not only from outside academics but even from those on the government payroll, from government

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scientists to departmental bureaucrats. This is especially true when it comes to foreign policy. As David Carment describes, there's been a notable decline in dialogue between policy-makers and academics – a decline likely abetted by the relative dearth of private think tanks that can explore and offer advice on these matters.

In that sense, the issue of whether academics undertake innovative outreach activities, offer policy-relevant analysis, and engage outside of academia might ultimately be moot – if there was no one listening on the other end. Of course, if the government doesn't seem to be listening, as it appears in Canada, one can then only hope that the general public has at least more receptive ears.

Stephen McGlinchey:

I was interested to (yet again) see the issue of the scholarship/policy divide coming up. This issue raises its head regularly and the accusation is a common one – that academics are too consumed with navel gazing and have forgotten the importance of the impact of their work on the world of policymaking. I agree with this view. Though, I do not think that writing run of the mill policy articles is the solution.

What I am seeing in the academic and 'policy' publication worlds right now is a polarisation. Academic journals have gone off into their ivory towers and battened down the hatches. Or, they have pursued failed strategies that have not harnessed the power of the digital age. This has left journals (in a general sense) isolated in a world that their format no longer recognises as legitimate (archaic copyright practices, pay-walls, huge fees for accessing articles for those unfortunate souls without an institutional subscription etc.).

On the other hand, 'policy' publications like *Foreign Policy* have generally become news chasers – publishing fast analysis often with little substance. Such publications measure their success based on page views. And, the logic there is the more stuff you pump online, the more views and tweets you get, and the more advertising revenue you earn. This is simply churnalism for profit. It is not a solution to anything. Most of that content is just here today, gone tomorrow. Though, there are plenty of diamonds in the rough, but they are often buried under the volume of content that these sites pump out. Just looking at the front page of the newly redesigned *Foreign Policy* website feels like I'm being assaulted with an ADHD mess.

The solution is somewhere in the middle ground. At the risk of blowing one's own trumpet, E-International Relations was created for that very purpose some years back. While we still have a lot of work to do (and we do so with a tiny budget and a non-profit model) giving academics a space to write accessible but informed articles that are published freely on an open platform is the way ahead. It does not replace journals – it compliments them. Academics need scholarly venues to publish. But, if (for example) each academic who has written a very complicated paper for a journal was to also write a 1-2000 word article explaining their findings in non-jargon terms for a publication such as E-IR – they could have their cake and eat it. While doing so they could sharpen their skills at communicating their work to a wider audience and possibly get some impact on the policy agenda. Those academics who already do this, whether on E-IR or on their own blogs, are finding it rewarding.

Robert Murray:

At what point does the outside world finally recognize that not every political scientist is a “public intellectual”? Kristof's piece highlights a series of poignant observations about the role of policy research, or at least policy relevant research, and how the rest of the world benefits from public intellectualism. There have been a number of outstanding responses to Kristof's contentions that effectively defend and clarify the many misconceptions in Kristof's original piece, but it is difficult to disagree with his underlying argument.

I believe it important to repeat some of the points made by other colleagues who have responded to Kristof's piece, most notably that not all political scientists, or academics in general, are meant to be what Kristof calls “public intellectuals”. I have long argued that political science, especially international relations, has argued itself into irrelevance in many ways. Circular and insular arguments in niche journals (of which there are far too many) have hurt the field, as has the inherently cliquish nature of it. Conferences like the ISA or APSA are great examples of this,

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as the roundtables or discussion panels often include exactly the same prominent names over and over. This may come as a result of the fact that conference organizers want to attract a good audience and they know big names put butts in seats but in doing so, they often discount emerging researchers that are doing excellent work in their own right.

The internal politics of political science also impact how political scientists are able to reach a broader audience. There is no shortage of brilliant minds in political science but the media in particular are quick to look only to famous institutions. This reflects an outdated perception of how to evaluate work that might be relevant. Yes, Harvard and Oxford have great experts, but so do other institutions that may not be as well known. Because of the inherent shortage of academic positions, top-notch experts are working all over the world in emerging or small institutions, in the community college system, in independent think-tanks or in journalism. Thus, it is not that the work does not exist; it is that media outlets are doing a poor job of identifying the best sources of that work.

Do not get me wrong, I have never understood the need for me to write a 10,000 word article with 200 footnotes when I can probably make the same argument more succinctly that will reach a wider audience in 3,000 words. However, I also recognize the value in scholarly research that is not meant for wider audiences. In this way, I have previously argued that academic work and policy work are two different languages. Not all academics can speak the language of policy and the same is very true vice versa. I do not see anything wrong with that.

About the author:

Robert W. Murray is Vice-President of Research at the Frontier Centre for Public Policy and an Adjunct Professor of Political Science at the University of Alberta. He holds a Senior Research Fellowship at the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies and Research Fellowships at the University of Calgary's Centre for Military and Strategic Studies and University of Alberta's European Union Centre for Excellence. He is the co-editor of *Libya, the Responsibility to Protect, and the Future of Humanitarian Intervention* with Aidan Hehir (Palgrave, 2013), *Into the Eleventh Hour: R2P, Syria and Humanitarianism in Crisis* with Alasdair MacKay (E-International Relations, 2014), and *International Relations and the Arctic: Understanding Policy and Governance* with Anita Dey Nuttall (Cambria, 2014). He is the Editor of the IR Theory and Practice blog on E-IR.