



The role of UK academics as security 'experts' for news media

Ben O'Loughlin

Ben.O'Loughlin@rhul.ac.uk

<http://newpolcom.rhul.ac.uk>

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Why do academics make contributions to news media, and why do journalists turn to academics in particular moments or contexts? This paper presents findings from a series of interviews and focus groups with academics with experience of offering expertise in 'security' matters, and with the journalists and news producers who engage with them. Academics and journalists have competing interests, motives, modes of communication and modes of analysis. Any academic thinking of appearing as an 'expert' must be alert to these differences, and to the resulting trade offs and risks. While several academics suggested a concern at being 'used' by media, it is argued that there are opportunities and strategies for academics to make a contribution to news media in a positive sum manner, in which neither the news organisation nor the academic feel they have been manipulated. The paper also indicates the diversity of academics' consideration of their media engagements, particularly concerning their understanding of who they intend to communicate to. It is not clear academics necessarily see themselves as accountable for their media statements, possibly because so much news is seen as mere 'filling time'. Yet while the journalist may forget, or the interviewer may not even be listening, the academic's peers, colleagues, and students may take a keen interest.



Introduction

In the summer of 2006 I was working on a research team investigating the changing media-security culture in the UK following the 2003 Iraq war. The possibility emerged that as 'expert' researchers in the field of security, we would be called upon to comment in news media on security matters. Yet our object of research was media coverage of security matters. In a moment of vertigo, it was clear we ran the risk of becoming (part of) the object of our own analysis. What if my own media appearance was part of the media coverage of security events we were coding and analysing? We risked falling into something akin to a performative trap, if a performative refers to 'an act that produces the identity or state of affairs it appears merely to represent' (Barnett, 2003: 21). By appearing on radio and television to talk about government security policy or the impact of the 'war on terror' on multicultural relations, were we contributing to the production of a security culture that our coding and analysis merely sought to represent?

This episode highlights some of the difficulties that arise when media ask academics to lend their 'expertise' to a programme or publication, whether as a direct on-air comment or written article, or indirectly through supplying background knowledge to news researchers, journalists and documentary makers. Are academics separate from the society they will comment upon? What is the epistemic status of their 'expertise'? For whom do they speak: themselves, their university, or their discipline? And to whom do they speak; do they presume their audience to be governments, publics, or other academics? Conversely, why do journalists call on academics to perform the role of 'expert', and how do academics rank alongside policy practitioners, lawyers, NGO leaders, live witnesses, and even celebrities? Through an examination of the dynamic of the relationship between academics and journalists, a number of questions emerge concerning the production, circulation and contestation of knowledge in and across societies today.

This paper presents findings from a series of interviews and focus groups with academic 'experts' in the fields of international relations and securities studies, as well as with newsmakers and military policymakers in the UK. While these academics operated in the fields of international relations and security studies, many of the findings may be applicable across academics more broadly. This research was part of the larger project mentioned at the start of this paper, entitled *Shifting Securities*, that ran from 2004-2007 (www.mediatingsecurity.com). Alongside these elite interviews, researchers

carried out a large scale audience ethnography to diagnose shifting audience perceptions of security during this period of continual security catastrophes, for instance Hurricane Katrina, the 7/7 London bombings, and the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war. Additionally, a discourse analysis of these security events was carried out, such that the relations between media producers, texts and audiences could be mapped. The question of 'expertise' cut across several larger research questions *Shifting Securities* addressed, such as: what sources of news do audiences find salient, credible and trustworthy? Why does so much news content appear little more than idle speculation and 'breaking rumour'? Who has the power to set or disrupt news agendas in the reporting of security and the 'war on terror'? Given that many 'experts' lent credence to the claims that Iraq possessed WMD in 2002 and 2003, and the central role of 'terror experts' in defining Al-Qaeda and other risks and 'threats' in recent years, the place of academics in the production of knowledge about security and terror deserves scrutiny.

The paper begins by introducing the concept of symbolic power, and how different types of experts possess different symbolic resources, which they can utilise in different ways. The issue of symbolic power raises questions of the distribution of power and the need for a critical analysis of the role of academic experts. The main body of analysis sets out dynamics in the academic-media relationship, specifying the reasons identified by participants in this study for why media use academics and academics use media. Based on these participants' contributions, some problems in their use of media are highlighted. The paper then considers the timing of academic interventions into political and media cycles, and the implications this might have for the relationship between academic research and the society with which it might engage. Finally, the paper concludes by suggesting avenues for further research on the role of academic 'experts' as they continue to engage with media.

The symbolic power of academic experts

The relationship between power and expertise has been theorised in several ways, for instance in studies of 'epistemic communities', or Foucauldian studies of power/knowledge and the constitutive power of expert discourses (scientific, legal, medical) on social life. For the analysis of academic experts contributing to news media, however, the concept 'symbolic power' seems to offer immediate explanatory value. A symbol generally denotes the combination of a



sign with its meaning, a representational device, often in structural relationships with other symbols. Symbols can be critical to struggles for power, for instance by helping to cohere identities or represent characteristics of one’s group or the other (Calhoun, 2002). The academic expert may have importance by conveying information, but their importance also lies in what they symbolise. The presence on screen of an academic with rows of bookshelves behind them represents a moment in public debate – the moment when academic authority intervenes (or the moment when the audience stops paying attention). The power of the academic expert comes from what they symbolise – the academy, legitimate knowledge – and we might hypothesise that their success derives from their capacity to perform this symbolic role – to look and sound the part.

The symbolic power of academic experts is a function of a particular *economy* of news values, in which the academic meets criteria of value for the news producer. The news values for news reporting conventionally refer to sensationalism, new-ness, live-ness, and immediacy (Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2007, chapter 2). But beyond the initial report, a news programme or long story may strive to meet other criteria, such as the supply of context, depth, and balanced critique or opinion. Academic experts can supply these valued phenomena. In an economy of news that values detailed background information, an academic expert has symbolic power. They supply that detailed information, but additionally, when on screen, they symbolise the figure with the socially-sanctioned authority to provide that information. In the UK, we might speculate, an academic expert symbolises detached learning, political neutrality, and decades of study in a specialised field; hence the ‘ivory tower’ label. We might also distinguish between the symbolic value of empirical researchers and the value of theorists. Could it be that academic ‘practitioners’ who undertake fieldwork are afforded greater authority because fieldwork requires them to be co-present with the phenomenon under study? In addition, the role of academic experts must be situated in the broader context of changing conceptions of the ‘public intellectual’, which varies by country and culture.

Experts from other professions offer alternative value because they symbolise something else. Retired military generals symbolise first-hand experience of war, and possible contemporary knowledge if their protégés are now conducting operations. Think tank figures mimic academic experts insofar as they symbolise study of a specialised policy field; they may also represent the insider relationships and insight within the Westminster village or Capitol Hill

networks. An NGO policymaker may be able to offer in-house studies of a policy field, and offer the televisual value of passionate advocacy, but they lose the value of detachment. The power of each type of expert is differentiated by the symbolic resources they possess (Couldry, 2003, 38-39).

The analysis in this paper will focus on academic experts’ testimony of their own experiences contributing to media. However, we might envisage a study of media content to identify exactly how academic experts do perform. Such an analysis would need to take the multimodal approach introduced by Kress and van Leeuwen (2001). For these authors, the analyst must investigate how different modes or sensory dimensions of a text come together. How are verbal and visual modes combined to produce a certain meaning, whether on a webpage, a television screen, a children’s picture book, or a fashion magazine? For instance, Lilie Chouliaraki (2006) has written a multimodal analysis that illuminates how television coverage of war and disaster can produce, through the use of maps, graphics, interviews and other devices, different degrees of proximity between audiences and those depicted as suffering. A multimodal analysis of the role of academic experts in media might consider:

- **Context/background.** Is the academic in a television studio, in their office, standing in the street? With experts generally, is the context public or private, official or non-official?
- **Individual appearance.** What is the academic’s dress, how do they carry themselves, how is their bearing? How does this vary by academic field, by age or cohort, and national media or political culture?
- **Social interaction.** How does the academic interact with the interviewer or with other guests? Is the mode of address shared? How is implicit or explicit disagreement handled?
- **Institutional title.** How is the academic introduced, and what caption are they granted? Do the academic, interviewer or other speakers refer to this title? Does the academic choose to represent themselves, for instance as generic ‘terror expert’, or do they represent an institution?
- **Degree of certainty.** Does the academic express certainty of opinion, or do they deliberately interject uncertainty into the report or debate? Does the academic confirm or challenge the report? Do they close down or open up the range and scope of understandings? And through what rhetorical devices and gestures is certainty/uncertainty performed?



Do we need a critical analysis of the role of academic experts and their symbolic power? If so, we might draw upon two concepts of symbolic power identified by Nick Couldry (2003). The first, *weak* conception arises in John Thompson’s *The Media and Modernity*: ‘the capacity to intervene in the course of events, to influence the actions of others and indeed create events, by means of the production and transmission of symbolic forms’ (Thompson, 1995: 17). Clearly certain social agents can intervene by producing and transmitting symbolic forms, for instance political parties, religious bodies, and universities. But Couldry adds a further layer:

A strong concept of symbolic power, by contrast, would insist that some concentrations of symbolic power (for example, the concentration from which contemporary media institutions benefit) are so great that they dominate the whole social landscape; as a result, they seem to natural, that they are misrecognised ... and their underlying arbitrariness becomes difficult to see. (Couldry, 2003: 39).

Symbolic power differs from material power insofar as it bestows the capacity to shape how we describe society, how we decide what count as social ‘facts’, and what styles and genres of communication are valid. Strong symbolic power, consequently, allows for descriptions of society that underplay or ignore the inequalities of symbolic power that enable such descriptions (Bourdieu’s ‘symbolic violence’). We might infer from Couldry’s two concepts of symbolic power that a *critical* analysis of the role of academic experts would focus on the extent to which academic experts contribute to the maintenance of certain forms of interpretation, certain loci of authority, and certain modes and styles of address. In other words, we might ask whether academic experts sustain ‘status conflict’ (Carey, 1989: 88) by misrecognising or neglecting the right of other figures to speak, by closing off alternative interpretations, or by not challenging the unequal distribution of symbolic power that they benefit from. Writing on the importance of problem definition in politics, Murray Edelman writes, ‘The definition of the problem generates authority, status, profits, and financial support while denying these benefits to competing claimants’ (1988: 20). Is it the case that academic experts profit from their position to define problems – profit in terms of authority, status, and raising financial support?

Due to the selection process of this study, such a critical analysis might appear difficult. Academics were invited to interviews and focus groups on the basis that they had considerable experience of engaging with news media. In general, these were not academics that found themselves excluded and who could give testimony to

exclusionary processes. However, this does not foreclose any critical analysis of academic experts’ use of symbolic power, because the study does shed light on many characteristics, processes and tensions at play for academics that do engage with news media. The following sections of this paper therefore set out the relations between academics and journalists, based on our interviews and focus groups. Why do journalists use academic experts, and why do academics want to appear in news media?

Why do journalists use academic experts?

Filling space

Journalists have to find sufficient material to cover a slot in a news programme, whether it is a word count for a newspaper report or a time slot in a radio show. This is a particular problem for journalists on 24 hour news channels; such channels have become associated with repetition and speculation as cheap ways to fill time. Academics can fill space, and it may be that news researchers do not identify any particular academic they call to fill a space; rather they just want *any* academic. For instance, in the following quote Air Marshall Lord Garden, the former Director of Chatham House and Liberal Democrat peer who also enjoyed careers in the RAF and Ministry of Defence, suggests that his capacity to appear on the BBC’s flagship radio current affairs show, *The Today Programme*, was due not to his particular intellectual qualities. Rather it was more a function of his capacity to pose as a different authority figure (ex-military, academic, think tank director, politician) to fit the story, because of his contactability through different offices, and his sheer availability:

I think you have to understand that all this is being done by underpaid researchers who want to have the BBC Radio 4 on their CV, who go to the database [...] or they ring up King’s [College London] or they ring up Chatham House - and one of the best ways that I - and I can get on the media more often perhaps than some of my colleagues - that I am a King’s visiting professor, I’m a Chatham House research fellow, I’m at RUSI as a member of council, and so when they phone up King’s, I’m there. They phone up the Lib Dem press office, they’ll put me forward for whatever it is. But actually having little buttons on the web—somebody a researcher will, looking for a particular topic, put in that topic. So if you put in that topic and your name comes up, they will look for you. So the thing is random—it’s not John Humphrys [the presenter] in



the morning saying, ‘I must talk to Tim Garden’, it’s the Today researcher the night before saying, ‘Who the hell can we get who might be in London and available for the morning?’ And availability is another thing. If you get a reputation for turning up – reliability - they go for you. (Shifting Securities, Strand C, Interview 18, Paragraph 43).

Garden possessed a range of symbolic resources then. He could appear in several guises, and call upon different sources of knowledge and experience. Yet symbolic power matters little if an academic cannot reach a studio. Several other ‘experts’ pointed to the importance of being on a researcher’s mobile phone contacts list as determining whether one is called, and that often news programmes would use academics without any expertise just to fill time. One commented, ‘I can’t even begin to list the number of talking heads programmes where ... they have little knowledge of the topic, but they were the only people they could find to get on there’. (Shifting Securities, Strand C, Focus Group 6, Paragraph 10). There is a tension, then, between the notion of a hierarchy of experts, with journalists recruiting the ‘top’ experts first, versus the daily, practical need for those working in news media to fill time with, in some cases, whichever ‘expert’ is available.

Eloquence

In some cases journalists believe an academic expert might add a hook, an intriguing new angle to a story, or a way to make the story more striking to audiences. Some academics gain a reputation for this – for being not just eloquent, but for being able to simplify a complex situation in an enlightening way, making the story intelligible for viewers in ways journalists cannot. One participant suggested Michael Clarke, then a professor at King’s College London, exemplified this:

He’s very gifted, and the reason he’s called back by TV stations all the time is that he’s a very good communicator. He can explain very complex things in relatively simple and understandable language. And he may not be the best expert on all these topics or the best researcher on the topics he talks about, he doesn’t need to be, he is a great communicator. (Shifting Securities, Strand C, Focus Group 6, Paragraph 14).

Balance

Journalists construct a story with a main angle then possibly one or two counter opinions, so that the journalist can claim the report is balanced. Here, the journalist uses the academic, to say something

obvious, to express one counter opinion in a neat soundbite, and lend their academic authority to that counter opinion.

Lively debate

Equally, the journalist is using the expert to create polarisation and conflict. Experts will be set up against each other. This appears more the case in US media than British or European, but those academics interviewed (and myself) can recount instances of journalists or researchers phoning to ask, “We are going to cover story X and we need a person to argue position Y. Could you argue that position for us?”

Visual composition

News editors want an appealing visual composition to the studio debate, in parallel to the political composition. The ethnic minority experts interviewed expressed this concern. One editor of an Arabic daily newspaper in London joked that he was called up by BBC News during the opening of the 2003 Iraq war because he had a moustache like Saddam Hussein. Editorial balance on television is not just a matter of political content, but visual balance, because television is a visual medium and the audience must be *shown* balance. The importance of the image of the talking head was commented upon by one expert, who suggested people would comment, ‘Oh, I saw you on TV, looks good, but I haven’t got the foggiest idea about what you said it was about’. (Shifting Securities, Strand C, Focus Group 17, Paragraph 7).

Contextual information

Journalists use academics for contextual or background information. They call an academic or email a list of questions, and use the academic’s response without giving them credit. Some academics did not object to this practice, as it ensured the journalist at least has adequate information for their story; better the journalist has the academic’s view than simply borrow from wikipedia. Similarly, a documentary maker suggested he talked informally to academics just to get fully briefed. Very senior academics would get taken for lunch by journalists in return for background information.

Why do academics want to appear in news media?

Public education

A majority of participants felt it was important to improve the quality of information in public debate, to correct misconceptions, and to



challenge unsubstantiated claims by politicians, military figures and others. One commented, ‘I firmly believe the whole world of news media should be public education to get the public enough information to come to make up their own minds on something’, and they suggested academics were central to the provision of such information. But in the ‘war on terror’ or the post-9/11 security context it is difficult to identify any academic experts who have had a major impact on public awareness in the UK. The media personalities who have most effect on government policy and on public awareness tend to be so-called ‘national institutions’, such as David Attenborough the wildlife television presenter, who endorsed the science behind global warming; or Jamie Oliver the celebrity chef, who campaigned for better school meals for children. There is no equivalent for security and defence policy. Yet there may be good reasons for this. For instance, one focus group participant explained the ‘public education’ role in terms of a division of labour, including the provision of background information, challenging government policy in on-air debates, or by deconstructing a policy. From this perspective, it may appear it is for the *field* of academics to perform the role of public education between them.

Self-promotion

Contributing to news media was identified by participants as a means to publicise their research, to build up their profile, to publicise their publications, and to gain a presence to improve their job prospects. One interviewee said:

I think my yardstick for agreeing to do something or not is my own self-interest. If Hungarian TV [call] ... it's not interesting for me. Or if it's whatever, another small country that is not interesting in terms of my research, future employment, whatever I have on my plate, I'm not interested. I do American TV, I do British TV, I do German TV, and maybe French, that's what I do. (Shifting Securities, Strand C, Focus Group 6, Paragraph 10).

It is an open question whether self-promotion necessarily contradicts the role of public education.

Institutional publicity

Some academics suggested they were under pressure to enhance their university’s status by making media contributions. One participant spoke of a pressure from the ‘top’ of their university, who ‘[say] look at LSE, they’re so cool, they are really very clever at marketing themselves and they’re attracting all of these overseas

students and they have this high public profile, can’t you do more ... can’t you do more media. (Shifting Securities, Strand C, Focus Group 6, Paragraph 17)?’ Yet not all were cynical about this. Some interviewees felt this was a duty, one of the responsibilities of their job.

Influencing policy

Many academics wish to influence a policy debate in a particular direction. Here, in the UK, our experts suggest newspapers may be more usefully targeted than TV appearances, as UK newspapers are more partisan and able to initiate long term campaigns on issues. British TV is regulated to be largely impartial. It is the inverse of the US, perhaps, where the press aspire to balance and TV is commercial and partisan. Influencing policy has a political dimension the academic must consider too: are they representing themselves or their institution when seeking to influence debate?

It is clear that these four motivations for academic experts to engage in media work may contradict and raise tensions for academics to balance, with each choosing the motives they wish to emphasise. Moreover, academics may be attempting to achieve several of these objectives, for instance public education could be a means to influence policy. Next, we shall see how engaging with the media can do academics harm as well as good:

Problems for academics with the manner in which they are used

Fulfilling others’ agendas

Is an academic who finds themselves inserted into a pre-planned package of a report, slotted in to express opinion X before the journalist then turns to someone else with opinion Y, simply being used to fulfil the journalist’s agenda?

Loss of control

Academics risk being misquoted or quoted out of context. In a two minute pre-recorded interview, the journalist may take seven seconds, and may take those seven seconds out of context. For this reason, some academics suggested, it is perhaps best to only do live TV interviews. Even live interviews can pose problems, however. One participant commented, ‘They’ve been in the middle of a broadcast and they turn around and ask you the exact questions you’ve said you’re not going to answer.’ (Shifting Securities, Strand C, Focus Group 6, Paragraph 5). Another area identified by academics as one



in which they lost control of their image was captioning and titles. One participant said, ‘I went on TV and insisted that they did not call me a terrorism expert, because I do not feel I’m a terrorism expert, but yet they called me a terrorism expert.’ Another commented on why this can happen:

They’ve usually got thirty seconds before you come up [on screen], so if someone’s sitting in the gallery going “what’s this guy, he’s what, he’s what, he’s what? Put him down as King’s College, put him down as Imperial [College]”, and then it’s completely chaotic when they come to actually type it. (Shifting Securities, Strand C, Focus Group 17, Paragraph 8).

Again we find symbolic resources can be disrupted by the mundane and often chaotic process of making a news report.

Dangers of simplification

It is very difficult simplifying academic research into language suitable for mass media. Current news values such as novelty, liveness and immediacy appear to preclude explanations of political events that depend on structural factors. Moreover, journalists often seek concrete answers and ask simple questions like “How is this crisis going to end?” or “What is the solution?” Academics will tend to resist such simple analysis. Indeed, at what point does simplification lead to misrepresentation? One participant suggested that journalists and academics think differently, and commented, ‘that’s the most difficult bit, to be able to withstand giving them the concreteness that they are looking for.’ (Shifting Securities, Strand C, Focus Group 6, Paragraph 15). Yet given that UK academics are usually publicly funded, is it not a duty to be able to explain research and knowledge to the citizens who fund it? The example given earlier of Michael Clarke being able to communicate complex ideas suggests it is not impossible.

Professional reputation

An academic’s colleagues on campus may be watching and judging. At a focus group at one university, the professors said they routinely discussed how their colleagues had performed. One participant said, ‘If I listen to someone on TV who sounds very stupid or makes stupid remarks, I make a mental note.’ (Shifting Securities, Strand C, Focus Group 6, Paragraph 28). Some may resent a colleague for working with news media, whereas others accept the need for academics to perform the media ‘expert’ role, though they too may believe it entitles them to criticise a colleague’s media performances. An academic can therefore easily gain an unwanted reputation.

Guilt by association

Academics vary in their politicisation, integrity, and their ability to perform in news media. One academic risks being associated with others who they may deem unrepresentative of their profession. Some academics are happy simply to appear in the media, and will speak on subjects on which they have no expertise (‘better I speak than leave it to someone else’). Additionally, there are ex-generals or think tank figures still connected to public affairs and policy and whose expertise will be coloured by their personal and political interests. Recall those experts who were certain the Saddam Hussein regime possessed WMD in 2002 and 2003. If some experts have significant political biases (however defined), we might hypothesise that audiences might infer that all experts are biased, including academics.

Hence, academics might ask whether their careers will really suffer by ignoring requests for media contributions. It is a difficult balancing act. If the academic is firmly committed to an ethic of public education, they may feel that a few mistakes or negative experiences with journalists are a small cost in the larger struggle.

A critical evaluation of academic experts

Unfounded assumptions about audiences

The academics participating in this study did not appear to have given great consideration to who their audience would be when they make media contributions. This question elicited a significant pause in focus groups. There was a very vague sense of who the public might be, and who might be watching particular stations. For instance, one participant would not talk on Sky News because its audience were ‘ignorant’, whereas another thought Sky News was worth targeting because its audience were ‘elite’ people in hotel rooms, and government ministers who always had it on in the background. The relationship to a public produced bafflement for one academic, who recalled:

... the moment when people on planes and buses would say, “oh aren’t you the”... [After] all the serious stuff you do, as an academic you’re doing policy-related stuff ... but you go and do some stupid two-minute studio thing on television and suddenly its like, “oh, wow” and suddenly this has meaning. And that’s weird. (Shifting Securities, Strand C, Focus Group 6, Paragraph 18).



It may be significant that the academic expert who appeared to have given most thought to his audience was Lord Garden, and we might ask whether this is because he held roles outside academia – in the military, think tanks and party politics. In the following quote he discusses how he calculates the extent of his influence:

Interviewer: *Would it be fair to say that your thought processes have been engaged far more with some idea of an audience or the public since you became a politician than they were when you were only a commentator?*

Garden: *No, I don't think that is true. I mean, I have to admit that I enjoy enormously the privilege of being able to speak on these programmes where, I mean, the alternative as an academic is that you get invited to give the wonderful annual lecture at a - I'd better be careful - a university in the north which takes you most of the day to get there and you spend part of that day preparing the lecture and you get around 200 people and it lasts about half an hour and you think it was jolly good there were that many people to listen to you and however it works, and you spend the night. So in a sense, that's three days to convey your views to a couple of hundred people who are probably already immersed in that field because that's why they've come and they've got their own views on it - compared with spending an hour whipping to White City and speaking to, admittedly, a minority-audience programme, *Newsnight*, but two million people for five minutes. Now, to me, [its] productivity. (*Shifting Securities, Strand C, Interview 18, Paragraphs 14-15*).*

Accountability for ‘effects’

Interviewees had not considered that their words might have effects that they might be accountable for. To speak publicly is surely speaking to have an effect, but few had considered potential effects and struggled to answer this question. Given that these academic security ‘experts’ routinely engaged with media and, consequently, took space that other academics could not, this might seem complacent. There were a few exceptions however. After the 7/7 London bombings in 2005, for instance, several academic experts suggested they self-censored the analyses they provided during television appearances to avoid contributing to anti-Muslim feeling and social tension. They tried to avoid confrontational media situations.

Accountability for mistakes

On the question of accountability, the question arose: does it matter if academics appear in news media and say something that proves utterly wrong? Some interviewees recalled academic ‘security experts’ speaking on BBC News 24 immediately after the Madrid bombings in 2003 and blaming ETA, just as the Spanish government was doing. The participant suggested that any qualified experts would have recognised that the multiple explosions, the form of the attack, made it unlikely ETA was responsible. Does this matter? Perhaps: the academic has it on their conscience; they risk appearing a fool before their colleagues and students; and, as with journalists that convey false information, they risk becoming part of the story.

The timing of academic interventions into media and policy cycles

This section introduces three ‘timings’ through which academic security ‘experts’ can intervene in media and policy cycles.

Breaking events

In the case of sudden catastrophes like 9/11 or the 7/7 bombings in London, politicians rarely speak instantly. For an hour or two, policymakers and politicians will have to gather information and actually deal with the catastrophe to the extent of their powers. But in those initial hours, news media will need someone to interpret what is happening, and academic ‘experts’ may be available. A few hours later, the emergency services and politicians begin to make public announcements. Following that first response, academics may be called upon again to interpret the first official response. Also, by now, as theories about causes emerge, journalists will be looking for some context, which again academics are primed to provide. In-house experts may be called upon first for this, but their range is limited. Once the 9/11 attacks became connected to Afghanistan, there were only a few academics in the UK with professional expertise on Afghanistan. Suddenly they were in demand.

Pre-planned policy events

To the extent that a hierarchy of security ‘experts’ exists in the UK, our participants suggested that government will call those at the top to be briefed at those moments when they about to launch a new policy. The Ministry of Defence or the Foreign and Commonwealth



Office, for instance, will try to ensure that opinion formers such as academic experts ‘understand’ the policy and become a ‘conduit’. One such expert in our study did note that, after the 9/11 attacks, the UK government became less prepared to brief experts, possibly due to a lack of certainty among policymakers. Nevertheless, insofar as academics are given the opportunity to act as ‘conduit’, they have some power to reinterpret the policy and shape debate – though always with the risk that government will withdraw the privilege of access to future briefings if the academic’s interpretation is ‘unhelpful’.

Creating a market for solutions prior to any problem

Academic research can produce findings that do not necessarily fit into policy cycles. Often, solutions can emerge before problems (Edelman, 1988: 22). There is a danger, then, of academics using the media as a platform to define public problems in ways that make their pre-existing solutions appear necessary; think of the phrase common to policy discourse, “If you have a hammer, you will see every problem as nail”. Yet if we study how governments, think tanks and businesses market their messages and policies, they can seem relentless in priming and constituting users at every stage of the formulation of messages and policies. Academics, by contrast, seem to work to punctuated cycles, only contacting media when a book or research project is finished. Permanent enrolling and marketing would appear un-academic.

At stake here is, perhaps, the problem of what type of (Kuhnian) paradigm social scientists are working within, including academic security ‘experts’. Relevant to this discussion is Steve Woolgar’s work on ideas. He distinguishes three perspectives of what ‘ideas’ are. From the *romantic* perspective, ideas have an essential meaning and give power to the holder. Good ideas spread naturally, and need no marketing. From the *modified romantic* perspective, ideas are essential but they do need help, their spread dictated by social context and institutions. This has led to analysis of ‘dissemination’ and ‘diffusion’ of apparently fixed ideas, and the supermarket or marketplace analogy: ideas are packaged and sold. Academics holding to this perspective exhibit anger when their idea, assumed to have an essential meaning they bestowed upon it as creators, gets ‘distorted’ by news media.

The third perspective identified by Woolgar views ideas as *constitutive*: ‘Ideas are constituted in and through the process of their articulation and representation’ (Woolgar, 2004, p452). To explain

this constitutive process, Woolgar looks at the case of marketing. Woolgar’s study of a computer company’s strategy indicates that it does not market finished products. The company involves potential customers – and reviewers – in the design of the product, inviting them to suggest ideas, flattering them, so that when the product is released reviews are positive and customers know they want the product. Woolgar considers this analogous to the production of ideas in social science: their value is not intrinsic and disseminated to predefined users, but a feature of a constructed set of relations that gives the idea its sense – relations underpinned by varying and overlapping claims to authority, knowledge, and ownership.

Academics have a number of uses. Depending on how they conceive their role – public education, self-advancement, political influence – they will target certain constituencies in strategic ways. News media are one pathway or field within which audiences can be reached. The point here is that this process could be continual if the academic felt it possible to contribute to the definition of problems as well as the identification of solutions, rather than wait for a breaking news event or an invitation to engage with government. But is the relentless formation of supportive networks and receptive constituencies part of the academic’s role? Different academics will hold to differing conceptions of knowledge production. For some, Woolgar’s notion of ideas as constitutive may appear a threat to the scientific process, for would it not imply that problems are set not by disciplinary concerns but by the needs of external users? This is a matter for further investigation; such investigation might include the role of funding councils in recommending forms of media engagement at different stages of the research process as a condition of awards.

Conclusions

Academics and journalists have competing interests, ways of talking, working and even thinking. Any academic thinking of appearing as an ‘expert’ must be alert to these differences, and to the resulting trade offs and risks. This study has suggested there are moments, and strategies, for academics to make a contribution to news media in a positive sum manner, in which neither the news organisation nor the academic feel they have been manipulated. The study also indicates the diversity of academics’ consideration of their media engagements, including their motives, their techniques, and their understanding of who they intend to communicate to. It is not clear academics necessarily see themselves as accountable for their



media statements, possibly because so much news is seen as mere ‘filling time’. Yet while the journalist may forget, or the interviewer may not even be listening, the academic’s colleagues, students and even a stranger on a bus may remember. Finally, it is important what stage in political processes academics make their interventions, for there are both long term and event-specific opportunities.

A number of research questions can be formulated to further develop our understanding of the role of academic experts. Firstly, what are *the boundaries of legitimate debate*? Are academics only invited to make media contributions if their findings or opinions fall within certain parameters of ideology or style? Studies of the relation between media and foreign policy focus on ‘spheres of consensus’, testing the hypothesis that when national political parties and policy elites are largely unified around a policy, there is little scope for media or other agents to alter the parameters of debate, whereas when elites lack unity around a policy, the sphere of ‘legitimate’ opinion broadens (Hallin, 1986). We might ask whether newsmakers pre-select certain academics that fall within a sphere of legitimate opinion, and also whether chosen academics self-censor to ensure they stay within that sphere of consensus. The findings of this paper suggest that, from the perspective of journalists and academics, the process is far messier, being driven by more practical considerations than ideological concerns. Despite this, through media content and discourse analyses, can we still identify structures of debate? Can we chart the evolution of spheres of consensus and whether certain positions or individuals are systematically excluded?

Second, there is an absence of research of *audience interpretations* of ‘experts’. Do audiences perceive academic experts as performing a useful role in news media and public debate? Do audiences even notice them? Do they distinguish academics from other figures of expertise? A third concern to emerge from this study is the *role of in-house experts*. It is noticeable that the BBC relies on a single in-house figure, Frank Gardner, for much commentary and analysis on security matters. Several participants in this study identified in-house experts as a US phenomenon that is beginning to take hold in the UK. Does the use of in-house experts imply a merging of journalist with expert? Does it restrict the range of expertise a channel draws upon? Can a single person have sufficient expertise across the field of security news? And what research and policy networks do in-house experts draw upon?

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