**Put a ring on it! Why we need more commitment in media scholarship**

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**Abstract**

This article reflects on how academics might best respond to the social, political and economic crises that are unfolding in the contemporary world: for example, increased inequality within nations, falling levels of trust in established political institutions, the growth of populist movements that seek to use racism and sexism to divide populations and the failure of the media successfully to scrutinise current dangers. In particular, in the light of the intensified marketisation of and managerialism within higher education, the article asks how communication scholars should respond to a situation in which the media are seen as intimately connected to both the emergence of and solution to these crises. To what extent should academics remain aloof from the grassroots movements that seek to intervene in these crises or should their research and teaching directly inform campaigns for social justice? The article discusses how academics are simultaneously urged to ‘engage’ in the social world in order to achieve “impact” and to retain a scholarly detachment that protects their “neutrality”. It argues that media studies, however, should not (and probably cannot) be insulated from fundamental questions of power and injustice and suggests that academics should refuse the false binary between “scholarly” and “political” activity to pursue a “committed” approach to their work.

**Keywords**

Media scholarship, media activism, engagement, research impact, research agendas.

**Biographical note**

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**Put a ring on it! Why we need more commitment in media scholarship (1)**

**Why get engaged?**

The British government is currently steering legislation on higher education through parliament that will entrench market forces within the university sector, making it easier for new providers to get a foothold and allowing existing institutions to fail. While most of the Bill focuses on the introduction of new regulatory structures that will increase competition for numbers and normalise an audit culture that serves as a proxy for meaningful quality, there is also an underlying assumption that what it calls “impactful research” (Department for Business Innovation & Skills, 2016, 16) will be crucial to the future of a knowledge economy and to prospects for growth.

What do the notions of “impactful” and, therefore, “impact-less” research actually refer to? Presumably they do not refer to readership of peer-reviewed articles given recent data that reveals that half of all articles are only read by their authors, reviewers and journal editors and that the average audience for a peer-reviewed article is 10 people (Lattier 2016). Instead, impact is precisely about how academic labour is measured by its application to *non-academic* settings. Research Councils UK (2014), for example, define research impact as “the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy”. To be “impactful”, therefore, is to be immediately relevant and to help generate informed citizenship as well as productivity and growth.

Impact, viewed in relation to potential societal benefits, is now a mainstay of research funding. It is central to applications to the US National Science Foundation and to the EU’s Horizon 2020 where it forms a third of the score (2). Impact is absolutely central to the UK’s Research Excellence Framework (REF) where it accounts for 20 per cent of the overall score for a particular institutional subject area and where it is measured by “impact case studies” – short narrative accounts of the social utility of a programme of work. There were nearly 7000 impact case studies in the most recent REF (3) that cost some £55 million to produce (Stern 2016, 22) so one could certainly argue that the impact of impact was indeed quite hefty.

Anyway, the breadth and depth of these case studies was seen as evidence of “an evolving culture of wider engagement, enhancing delivery of the benefits arising from research” (Stern 2016, 22). This appears to be a virtuous circle: academics, under pressure to be “impactful”, have abandoned their “ivory towers” to “engage” with the outside world (as it is and not simply as they would like it to be) in ways that have clearly benefited society and the economy.

My concern here is not that academics are being “incentivised” to interact with wider publics but that they are doing so on terms that are determined by policymakers who wish to see the maximum amount of “value” extracted from academic research. Despite the recommendation in the official review of the future of the REF that impact “need not solely focus on socio-economic impacts” but should also consider cultural factors (Stern 2016, 23), the government is quite clear that far more hard-edged concerns will dominate its research strategy: “to deliver national capability for the future that drives discovery and growth” (Department for Business Innovation & Skills 2016, 68). “Impact”, therefore, has come to be increasingly defined in increasingly instrumental terms so that, as John Holmwood (2015) puts it, “all publicly-funded research is to have users in mind, with commercial beneficiaries, policy-makers and practitioners foremost”. In the context of a higher education system that is overwhelmingly subject to a neoliberal preoccupation with enhancing productivity and stimulating competition, impact is now to be used as a tool both that is increasingly policed by bureaucrats and “end users” and that rewards skills and knowledge that can be most effectively commodified.

In order to be “impactful”, however, academics now have to be “engaged” and the disengaged academic has the same sort of unproductive reputation that is laid at the door of, for example, people who watch daytime TV or of the so-called “benefit scroungers” who populate such programmes. In a situation where universities – and particularly those with arts, humanities and social science programmes – are forced to justify any draw on the public purse, many of them have developed “public engagement” plans that demonstrate their relevance, their “connectedness”, and their “societal contribution”. Indeed, my own university, Goldsmiths, University of London, has an excellent engagement strategy that values public participation both in devising and disseminating research aimed at “affecting change for the common good” (Goldsmiths 2016). This sounds great and presents researchers with meaningful opportunities for critical research but it is a mere drop in an ocean of icy calculation where engagement and impact have been weaponised in ways that are far more likely to cater to the needs and interests of the powerful than they are to support progressive change, encourage risk-taking or to promote intellectual curiosity.

Indeed, we have more than enough evidence of the dangers caused by “engaged” academics. Consider the role of eminent economists like Larry Summers, Gary Gorton, Howard Davies, Glenn Hubbard and Fredric Mishkin, all of whom were embedded in some of the world’s leading universities where they spent their time calling for the deregulation of financial markets that ultimately led to the banking crash in 2008 and subsequent recession (Ferguson 2012, chapter 8, Mirowski 2015). Or instead consider the links between academics and the military where, in recent years, a range of historians, political scientists, technologists, anthropologists and sociologists have all lent their support to governments prosecuting the “war on terror” including the development of sophisticated surveillance technologies, new counter-insurgency strategies and innovative virtual reality platforms. Indeed, I was recently invited, presumably on the basis of my earlier work on terrorism and the media, to give a keynote talk on this subject to a conference organised by the NATO Centre of Excellence – Defence Against Terrorism in Ankara (4).

Kristian Williams describes this kind of academic labour as “armed social science” that is designed to “inform and structure legitimacy-building ‘hearts and minds’ programs, government propaganda and strategic concessions” (Williams 2016). Williams suggests that traditional forms of opposition to the encroachment on, or undermining of, “autonomous” scholarly activity, notably a normative ethics-based resistance focused on the principle of “do no harm”, are entirely understandable but probably not that effective if they avoid the exercise of political judgment. After all, anthropologists embedding themselves inside the military, as occurred with the Human Terrain System (Jaschik 2015), do not necessarily produce “bad anthropology” just as social policy scholars researching adviser-claimant interview techniques for the UK’s Department for Work and Pensions (University of York 2014) do not necessarily produce “bad sociology”. They do, however, risk colluding in illegitimate foreign interventions, abuses of power and punishing some of the most vulnerable in society.

In this context, Williams argues, neutrality alone is unable to deal with structured inequality:

The demand that social science be harmless, when inherent conflicts of interest are at play, amounts to a demand that it be irrelevant. It provides the formal appearance of neutrality but will tend to preserve the status quo. That is, if social scientists harm no one, their work will implicitly support the powerful. (Williams 2016) (5)

If, therefore, “engagement” is too loose a term, or too imprecise an aspiration, and if neutrality is insufficient when a more decisive political response is likely to be more effective, what is the role of the critical academic today? What are the most meaningful forms of resistance and to what extent should academic labour be confined to within the academy? Here, we can borrow from Edward Said’s 1993 Reith Lectures for the BBC in which he argued that intellectuals should seek to intervene in the social world first by recognising the implications of power and then telling the truth about these implications. Speaking truth to power (and Said was thinking here especially about Western hypocrisy concerning the struggle of the Palestinians for self-determination) involves “carefully weighing the alternatives, picking the right one, and then intelligently representing it where it can do the most good and cause the right change” (Said 1993, 8).

Intellectual thought, therefore, becomes especially meaningful when it is linked to the “right change”. Of course, there will be huge debates about what constitutes the “right change” but Said reminds us that intellectual life ought to be based on more than simply *participating* in the outside world. After all, the problems are likely to come not with engagement *per se* but with the methods and objectives of our engagement. Certainly, it takes some courage publicly to support an unpopular political position and therefore to invite flak and there are of course numerous personal and professional reasons for avoiding conflict. Said, however, is unapologetic about the temptation to lead an easy life when the conflicts surrounding us demand a more robust response.

Nothing in my view is more reprehensible than those habits of mind in the intellectual that induce avoidance, that characteristic turning

away from a difficult and principled position which you know to be the right one, but which you decide not to take. You do not want to appear too political; you are afraid of seeming controversial; you need the approval of a boss or an authority figure; you want to keep a reputation for being balanced, objective, moderate; your hope is to be asked back, to consult, to be on a board or prestigious committee, and so, to remain within the responsible mainstream; someday you hope to get an honorary degree, a big prize, perhaps even an ambassadorship. For an intellectual these habits of mind are corrupting par excellence. If anything can denature, neutralise and finally kill a passionate intellectual life, it is those considerations, internalised and so to speak in the driver’s seat. (Said 1993, 7-8).

Indeed, Said insists that the intellectual’s voice is all the more powerful when it connects to – or perhaps when it helps to amplify or to crystallize – movements for progressive social change. The academic is most inspired and inspiring when she is part of an organic chain of events:

One doesn’t climb a mountain or pulpit and declaim from the heights. Obviously, you want to speak your piece where it can be heard best; and also you want it represented in such a way as to affiliate with an ongoing and actual process, for instance the cause of peace and justice’ (Said 1993, 8).

“Affiliation”, for Said, refers not simply to the institution mentioned on conference name badges – the most visible symbol of academic networking – but to a commitment to struggle: to, as Said puts it, “the common pursuit of a shared ideal” (1993, 8). We can, of course, have an affinity with a set of normative ideas around ethics; we can recognise the affective dimension of the attempts to realise ethical positions; and we can show empathy with those face the brunt of unequal social relations. However, all this counts for little if we do not connect ourselves to, and ideally take part along with others in, movements for change. What we need, therefore, is neither a pallid attachment to “engagement”, nor utilitarian calls to be “impactful”, but a full-blooded commitment to equality, social justice and progressive social change.

**The committed media scholar**

How does this map on to the role of communication scholars in particular? Firstly, it does not mean that media activism by itself will automatically lead to good scholarship; nor does it mean that the mere demonstration of commitment will magically improve your intellectual standing. This would be a highly moralistic and empirically inaccurate claim. Indeed, a commitment to commitment does not preclude the need for quiet reflection and abstraction (Karl Marx, after all, wrote *Capital* in the silence of the British Museum’s reading room during the day before rather more noisily taking to the streets of Soho in the evening; note also that *Capital* took him so long to write that he would have missed several REF deadlines and thus would have been deemed not to have been ‘impactful’). Nor does a committed media scholarship *require* a policy orientation, although if you agree that policy refers less to a bounded legal process than a highly contested field in which “a variety of ideas and assumptions about desirable structure and behaviour circulate” (Freedman 2008, 13), then a policy dimension may complement other areas of critical media scholarship.

Mostly, however, a committed media scholarship is one that is focused on producing work that refuses to accept the legitimacy of the status quo and of inequality and discrimination as it relates to the communicative sphere; a committed media scholarship is one that re-imagines an environment that is based on a different operating system to the one that dominates today. Thanks, at least in part, to the origins of media studies in radical studies of culture, there is an enormous amount of such work in the field of media and communications although whether this work is “impactful” or “engaged” in the way in which higher education policymakers have conceived of these terms is perhaps less clear. Instead, this is a scholarship that is dedicated to critiquing the existing “order of things”, rendering that order as subject to change, and then re-ordering the field in such a way as to promote desirable values (such as equality, social justice and shared provision).

One very helpful way in which to imagine this process is through the lens of “defamiliarisation”. Nearly a century ago, Russian Formalists argued that the most powerful and most poetic art manages to interrupt our sensory experience of the world and to make the familiar seem strange. The best-known of the Formalists, Victor Schlovsky, claimed that writers like Tolstoy complicate our immediate sensory perceptions by refusing to name the most everyday objects and processes so that we are forced to confront how we interact with the world. Tolstoy, according to Schlovsky, “describes an object as if he were seeing it for the first time, an event as if it were happening for the first time” (Schlovsky 1917, 20). Defamiliarisation forces us to look at the world in a different light: “to transfer the usual perception of an object into the sphere of a new perception” (1917, 21).

Now that was a debate about aesthetic strategies more than about political opportunities (although it did not go down too well with an emerging Stalinist consensus on socialist realism). I believe that we that we should embrace the concept of “defamiliarisation” inside media studies and to challenge the idea that the representations and perspectives that are so effortlessly and elegantly proposed in newsrooms and costume dramas, in first-person shooter games and Hollywood movies, are in any way “natural”. Critical media studies can defamiliarise our world – force us to change the way we relate to our environment, make our world look strange and beautiful and, if we put it back together in a different way, make it look new.

This process of defamiliarisation relates to the notion of a committed media scholarship as one that focuses on de-legitimising hegemonic structures and routines in an effort to construct both a communications infrastructure and a symbolic landscape that is meaningfully diverse, democratic and creative. This is precisely what I have tried to do in my work on media policy (Freedman 2008, 2014): to build on the arguments of people like Robert McChesney (2004) who argue that, because our media systems are not in any sense “natural” but created as an expression of the vested interests that dominate at any one time, media policy is also a highly political, value-laden, interest-driven field. Media policy activism, therefore, seeks to de-naturalise taken-for-granted policy values, processes and outcomes and to propose new ones that have been either marginalised or silenced.

How might this approach to commitment relate to current challenges in our field? I want to highlight four areas of concern – both dangers and opportunities – in relation to the agendas we pursue, the methods we use, the normative positions we adopt and the affiliations we make.

Firstly, it is vital that we do not passively accept the agendas that are given to us either in terms of research funding or our more general orientation. There is a strong temptation to wait for strategic calls from our national or transnational funders and to tailor our research to those areas that are flagged up to us as important. These will often favour short-term, instrumentalist “solutions” to “problems” defined by others. In the case of the UK, argues John Holmwood (2015), “[r]esearch councils like the ESRC [Economic and Social Research Council] are increasingly setting research priorities determined by the Department for Business, Innovation & Science that provides its block grant of funding – for example, on ‘big data’ or the application of neuroscience to social problems.” Of course it is sometimes possible to tailor more critical research bids for strategic calls but at a time of diminishing funds and greater centralisation of research funding, this is by no means an easy task.

We should avoid, to the extent that it is possible, research programmes that reflect the priorities and serve the interests of market and state exclusively. Instead we should aim to expand research agendas and to make visible themes and questions that have been all too often marginalised either because they do not have an immediate solution (because they are complicated) or because they are not deemed to be significant (because they have not been defined as “problems” as such). This involves challenging the current fetish for technological solutions and market imperatives and highlighting issues of, for example, class, inequality, discrimination, labour, power and control both in relation to areas that already have salience (notably, big data, surveillance, and the internet of things) and in relation to emerging debates around rather more fluid concepts such as identity, diversity, power and democracy. The discipline of media, culture and communications is littered (or perhaps blessed is the more appropriate word) with pioneering research that challenges elite power and advocates for the marginal and the powerless. However, a funding system that increasingly privileges private and government beneficiaries together with managerial regimes that are overwhelmingly focused on rankings and audit culture is hardly conducive to a research environment that will protect, let alone nurture, independent and critical programmes of work. We need, therefore, both to challenge the encroachment of governmental and private sector interests into research agendas and to press for more inclusive agendas that relate (and sometimes emerge as a response) to ongoing crises and conflicts.

This might, for example, involve programmes of work exploring cultures of racism in contemporary Britain that are independent of the government’s PREVENT regime or ones focusing on the media’s vilification of refugees that seek to provide an evidential basis on which to confront news titles that break agreed codes of conduct. It would certainly mean more projects that comprehensively analyse coverage of key political events in order to hold broadcasters and editors to account, such as that produced by Berry (2016) on the BBC’s coverage of economic debates, by academics in the Media Reform Coalition (2015) on press coverage of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn or the articles collected by Jackson, Thorsen and Wring (2016) on the media’s role in the referendum on EU membership. These are all interventions into, as well as reflections on, debates on media power and editorial independence.

Second, we should reject a methodology that relies purely on describing, enumerating, mapping and measuring. This is not at all to suggest that we avoid empirical research for fear of being tainted as crude positivists or voracious number-crunchers. Indeed, the examples provided in the previous paragraph depend in part on quantitative analysis that then forms the basis of a critical framework through which to understand media performance. There is, however, the temptation to believe that in a political landscape that privileges “evidence based policy” and at a time when we have so much data, and so many ways of visualising and ‘drilling down’ into it, the data will speak for itself. This ignores the difference between logics of “calculation” and “evaluation” where the latter depends on the adoption of particular moral or political positions. As Couldry and Powell have argued in relation to the seductive allure of big data analysis (2014, 4), the ubiquity of data mining means that “more insights are made available about more aspects of everyday life but no opportunity is provided for these insights to be folded back into the experience of everyday life.” This question of agency is crucial both in terms of our status as researchers and our relationship to living subjects and social processes that are not reducible to the data they generate.

This relates to some rather old debates about the difference between “administrative” and “critical” research where the former is often seen as a rather unreflexive and narrowly empirical form of investigation while the latter is more methodologically promiscuous and wedded to the project of “defamiliarisation” that I outlined earlier. As Just and Puppis (2012, 17-18) put it, administrative research is often accused of “simply solving short-term problems and maintaining the status quo” while critical research is interested in “scrutinizing the taken-for-grantedness of societal structures”. However, crucially, they point out that the distinction between the two is not simply a methodological one – both schools rely on empirical tools – but a political one in that the “real basis for the dichotomy between critical and administrative traditions lies in the allegiance of researchers to the status quo versus change” (Melody and Mansell 1983, 109f, quoted in Just and Puppis, 2012, 18).

This is a salutary reminder that methods are neither innocent nor self-sufficient and that what animates our methodological choices are our chosen theoretical frameworks and preferred political commitments, in particular our willingness to press for change or to justify the status quo. I think this is particular important in debates, for example, over media ownership where battles over metrics often seem to obscure a more profound discussion about what is being measured and for what purpose. We are inundated with figures – HHI indexes, market share, diversity indexes, and consumption metrics – but these acquire meaning (and political efficacy) mostly in relation to one’s definition of democracy or normative position on how resources should be most fairly distributed. As I have written previously (Freedman 2014, 52): “Media ownership and levels of concentration are not …solely empirical matters, but ones that connect to more ideological questions about how, in neo-liberal circumstances, the market in particular is presented as the most desirable and efficient enabler of productive, symbolic activity.”

Third, we should not attempt to hide, displace or pretend that we don’t hold specific normative positions as researchers and scholars (neither does this mean that we should attempt to ram them down the throats of our audiences). Committed scholarship is motivated by a desire to investigate the social world in the hope that it can be understood and changed in the name of equality or social justice or democracy. Of course, the problem here is that these are very slippery terms and that one of our tasks is precisely to open up these normative positions to critical debate at the same time as attempting to realise them through research and advocacy.

This means that we need to adopt normative positions that are sufficiently *robust* to address the conflicts we are dealing with and sufficiently *precise* so that they are not co-opted by groups with very different value systems. For those working in media policy, this means that we may have to modify – or even drop – some of our most cherished principles around pluralism, liberalism and freedom. For example, in the UK, a commitment to press freedom is a pretty unremarkable phenomenon – after all who will declare themselves to be against press freedom? Yet its most energetic proponents are billionaire proprietors who are resisting any form of meaningful and independent self-regulation, arguing that this would involve an unacceptable form of intervention into sovereign markets. Liberal theory, argues Simon Dawes, now “conflates the freedom of the press with that of media owners” (2014, 22). If we are to continue using a discourse of freedom, then we will have constantly to distinguish between the freedoms that are exploited by the powerful and those that are sought by the poor and the vulnerable. Similarly, pluralism has largely been transformed from an aspiration to see a multitude of voices and outlets that resists centralised control into a measure to secure competition inside media markets. Its significance as a concept designed to challenge unaccountable build-ups of media power has been mostly eviscerated so that it may now be seen as a tool that keeps media markets fresh and dynamic instead of one that challenges their underlying logic of concentration and corporate control.

We also should not be afraid to criticise institutions that are most closely predicated on some of these core values if we believe that they are falling short of realising them. I have been struck by the reluctance by some advocates of public service broadcasting to say anything negative about the BBC during the recent Charter Review debate for fear of handing ammunition to its enemies in government and the press. Yet, if we view concepts like universality and public service as fundamentally desirable, then surely we have a responsibility to act when audiences themselves have highlighted serious issues concerning diversity, representation and editorial bias (see Puttnam 2016)? What is the point of adopting an uncritical defence of public service broadcasters if they themselves are internalising neoliberal agendas and organisational practices that undermine their ability to serve audiences of all backgrounds and from all locations and to hold power to account?

Fourthly, we should take the concept of “affiliation” very seriously, as with Said’s suggestion, mentioned earlier in this article, that we should affiliate “with an ongoing and actual process, for instance the cause of peace and justice”. This is the crux of the matter. Affiliation should not be a bureaucratic symbol of institutional identity but a marker of the willingness of scholars to participate in a process of social transformation. It would be far too crude to say that this means you canot be a committed academic unless you march, protest, occupy and shout; there is, of course, a space for quiet scholarship that defamiliarises hegemonic structures and that challenges powerful orthodoxies. Said’s point is not that intellectuals have to go on noisy demonstrations to be effective (or “impactful”) but that the work of intellectuals should be intimately and explicitly linked to their normative positions and should be in solidarity with movements that seek to realise them. Said claims that he always turned down consultancy work because he could never guarantee how his ideas might eventually be used. But he always, or at least to the best of his ability, accepted invitations to speak to campaign groups (notably pro-Palestinian and anti-Apartheid meetings) to which he was sympathetic. “In the end”, he argues, “one is moved by causes and ideas that one can actually choose to support because they conform to values and principles one believes in” (Said 1993, 2).

There are, of course, dangers associated with “taking sides”. It is especially tough if you want to be tenured or promoted; it endangers your chances of getting research funding; and, crucially, it can be seen as undermining your status as an independent scholar whose commitment ought to be to the “truth” as opposed to a “cause”. There is certainly “flak” associated with being an activist academic, for example when academics in the Media Reform Coalition (MRC) carried out some research in summer 2016 on broadcast coverage of the Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. They found that the BBC, in its main television news bulletins, gave twice as much airtime to critics as to supporters of Jeremy Corbyn. The BBC dismissed these findings as the work of a “vested interest group” although, interestingly, they did not actually dispute the results (Ridley 2016). Academics associated with the MRC are regularly accused of undermining their academic credentials even though they use standard and accepted methodological tools not simply to theorise “bias” but to seek to address it at the highest levels.

It is entirely legitimate for media scholars to see themselves not simply as “independent academics” but as activists who take inspiration from and attempt to embed their scholarly work in wider movements. In media policy work, for example, there is a strong temptation to measure engagement in terms of the number of submissions we make to government inquiries or the commissions we receive to produce reports on subjects that others have decided for us. That may indeed be useful and scholars may produce research that is interesting and useful. But it is necessary also to step outside of our comfort zone and talk not just *about* but *to* the people we are urged to call “stakeholders” or “publics” – and in particular to those who are most excluded from centres of power. Media policy scholars “should attempt to broaden the debate and to address the crisis by developing critical accounts of the faults of existing policy approaches while at the same time campaigning for specific remedies (to, for example, digital inequality, media concentration, press scapegoating and the decline of local news)’ (Freedman 2016, 130). In practice, this might mean a commitment to work with anti-austerity groups if we want to address the very narrow consensus in economic coverage; to work with minority communities in order to seek better representation of *all* the voices in this country; to work with refugee communities if we want to understand and change cultures of racism that are fostered through irresponsible media coverage; and to work with media unions in order most effectively to press for more safeguards for journalists in the face of bullying editors. There is a huge amount of work in media and communications scholarship that embraces this commitment but there are also huge pressures not to do so and to rein in the activist dimension of this approach to scholarship. Embracing the concept of affiliation can be a crucial defence against these institutional and ideological pressures.

**Conclusion**

In an increasingly marketised and competitive higher education environment, academics have to prove our “worth”; we are urged to “constructively engage” with the world and to turn away from idealistic forms of thought. In reality, neoliberal reforms in higher education have meant that the myth of the autonomous academic, ensconced in an ivory tower and with only minimal contact with the outside world, has long since disappeared. Yet it remains useful to policymakers and employers as a narrative that justifies the repositioning of the academic as someone who has a duty to “engage” and to make a pragmatic contribution to social and economic life.

This is not an argument for remaining “pure” and “detached”: there can be real value in engagement and impact and what scholar would not want to use her intellectual role to benefit society in one way or another? However, given the scale of inequality, poverty, militarism and discrimination in the world, there is a need for scholarly activity that is committed not only to user engagement and impact but to social change. As political concepts, engagement and impact say nothing about desired outcomes or underlying values: to be “engaged” and “impactful” is simply to enter into a relationship with groups outside the academy. To be “committed”, at least in the way it has been discussed in this article, is to attempt to change the terms on which this relationship takes place and to participate in the re-ordering of the social world along progressive lines.

By arguing for a media scholarship based above all on affiliation and commitment, I can be accused of advocating a role for academics that is uncomfortably and unjustifiably partisan – one that compromises the scholarly obligation to “remain true to the science”. But the committed scholar has to be just as accountable to her sources and just as rigorous in her examination of evidence as the “impartial” academic who, in any case, is hardly insulated from partisanship simply by *not* declaring an affiliation. At a time when there is such an unequal distribution of resources in our media landscape and when this landscape is characterised by the domination of attention, audiences and agendas by a very small number of powerful companies, a committed media scholarship can help to amplify arguments about the flaws of an entrenched media power and to work with others to secure a more just and democratic media system.

Our job descriptions tell us that we should only interpret the world; the point, however, is to change it.

**Notes**

1. This is an extended version of a keynote presentation at the ECREA pre-conference, “Cleaning the House: Testing Critical Concepts in Communication Society”, Prague, 8-9 November 2016.

2. Impact forms one of the three criteria (along with “excellence” and “quality and efficiency of the implementation”) by which applications to Horizon 2020 are evaluated. However, “impact” is by far the most detailed criteria with specific attention paid to strengthening competitiveness, supporting growth and “meeting the needs of European and global markets” (see Horizon 2020 evaluation at <http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/wp/2014_2015/annexes/h2020-wp1415-annex-h-esacrit_en.pdf>).

3. Indeed, impact case studies are one of the very few publicly available elements of the entire Research Excellence Framework exercise – see <http://impact.ref.ac.uk/CaseStudies/> for a fully searchable database.

4. I chose to decline.

5. This echoes a wider debate in the academy about the extent to which university staff who do not *actively* oppose neoliberal reforms are either colluding with or complicit in restructuring exercises. Posecznick (2014) argues that collusion suggests a purposeful participation in neoliberal transformations while Leathwood and Reed (2013) further distinguish between routine compliance (for example, putting in funding bids, publishing only in ‘elite’ journals, prioritising peer-reviewed articles) and complicity (which suggests being a knowing accomplice in unwelcome change). The dividing line is often not that clear: ‘as academics, we are enmeshed in endless contradictions’ in suffering from over-work, stress, guilt and anxiety but also experiencing pleasure and achievement in our work (2013, 1172). There is a danger, in my opinion, of lumping together those who are, for whatever reasons, complying with neoliberal reforms with those who are actively colluding with them; if we are to organise successful opposition, it is vital *not* to confuse the two groups.

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