UNIVERSITIES AS TRUTHSAYERS

JOHN AUBREY DOUGLASS

With the rise of neo-nationalist movements and a global trend toward autocratic-leaning governments, how might universities innovate to be more engaged and influential in combating attacks on open societies and, more generally, promote functional democracies?

In briefly exploring this topic, it is important to note that universities operating in liberal democracies, even those under threat, have much more leeway to affect change than, say, universities that are struggling to operate in increasingly authoritarian nation-states — a topic I have explored in previous writings.[1] For this reason, I focus this short essay on the realm of functioning democracies, with all their flaws and weaknesses.

1   See John Aubrey Douglass, *Neo-Nationalism and Universities: Populists, Autocrats, and the Future of Higher Education*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Open Access Project Muse, 2021. See also, What is the fate of Hong Kong's universities under Xi?, *University World News*, November 3, 2021; What's New About Neo-Nationalism? Autocrats Are Ancient. But Globalization, Migration, and Technology Are Giving Them Fresh Power, *Zocalo Public Square*, December 13, 2021; Under attack: universities and neo-nationalist movements, *University World News*, September 4, 2021; A Bolsonaro defeat will not fully undo his damage to Brazilian science: Deep cuts may be reversed, but the Brazilian president's anti-science rhetoric will do lasting damage, *Times Higher Education*, December 10, 2021; How Will "Benedict" Trump Be Remembered? The January 6 Coup Attempt in Historical Perspective, *LA Progressive*, February 3, 2022.

Within liberal democracies, universities act as anchor institutions with a breadth of influence unique within nation-states. But they are also viewed by many as elite enterprises, sometimes reinforcing inequality and acting as tools of globalists who ignore the wants and problems of local communities in a callous quest for open markets and international networks. More specifically, populist and neo-nationalist political actors espouse the view of universities as influential cogs in the so-called sinister "deep-state", as illiberal public spaces, intolerant of dissenting opinions, and increasingly dominated by largely left-wing actors — a view held with significant nuance even among those of moderate political persuasions and affiliations.

Part of the problem is within the academy itself, which often under-values local engagement. In some instances, the academic community has also shifted increasingly toward liberal litmus tests and reactive responses to radical right criticisms and political power, furthering the political and identity tribalism that erodes broad notions of democratic values. From cancel culture to the concept of gender fluidity, and sometimes extremely broad hate speech or so-called "trigger" speech policies — we can argue about what is anecdotal and what is truly problematic. We can say that the more negative perceptions of academics and universities amplified by largely right-wing media and social networks are not entirely inaccurate and, more importantly, pose a problem of eroding credibility with the larger public.

There is more. The tragedy of the Hamas/Gaza/Israel war has resulted in an unprecedented tumult of opposing demonstrators on many major university campuses in the US and Europe. Irreconcilable pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian views have led to counter demonstrations, pitting student against student and faculty and staff against their counterparts, and generating a reductionist and often destructive campus environment, drowning out those who might simply argue for an end to the war and for peace, and who find fault with all warring parties committing mass murder. The mantra "give peace a chance" is lost to historical memory amid violent clashes, the use of social media to promote disinformation, the formation of often leadership-less demonstrations, hateful doxing, and the like. The social activism promoted by universities has seemingly digressed into open intolerance.

Particularly in the US, but also in the EU, the uncivil nature of this debate creates one more real and exaggerated view of universities as intolerant environments — even if the most politically active and vocal are a minority in the larger academic community. Intolerance is a theme happily amplified in the right-wing media and politicking government hearings, adding to what could be viewed as an unprecedented credibility gap for universities, and their academic leaders, that will take years to hopefully repair.

As of this writing, there is also growing evidence of what might be called a Neo-Academic Cold War, the result of growing global economic and technological competition, and geo-political tensions. China's rise and military ambitions, and soft and sharp power agenda, Russia's unjustified war on Ukraine, political realignments reminiscent but different from the first Cold War; all have had a consequential impact on universities. After a period of integration, we now have a world of escalating economic sanctions, visa restrictions, war, and failed state-driven diasporas, as well as concerns over economic, political, and academic espionage and subterfuge.

Against these headwinds, we should all hope that universities can play an essential and elevated role in supporting open societies and democracies. Further, that the scientific knowledge and other forms of new knowledge they generate can drive or at least shape responsible public discourse on such important issues as climate change, clean energy and sustainability, pandemics, poverty, racism, immigration, the impact of technology, and, more generally, the promotion of rational thinking and policymaking.

Over decades, political observers have extolled the power not only of rational thinking, but also of competent communication to bring about mutual understanding and constructive social change. Never mind for now the many evils of social media and state-controlled narratives that supply Orwellian untruths practiced by Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, Vladimir Putin, Jinping Xi and other demagogues and autocrats; the concept of free and open communication as a mainstay for old and new democracies remains relevant.

If we adhere to this idea and hope that universities are important sources of truth and knowledge, as well as civil discourse, then, as noted, they need to seek ways to increase their credibility and expand their role

in and influence on society. Sticking to a fanciful vision of the academy as exclusively an autonomous ivory tower separated from the society it serves is old-school thinking. Universities can retain that role, but they also need a larger vision to shape public discourse, even if it might at times infringe on their non-partisan ethos.

Shifting the internal culture of universities, and mitigating these perceptions, is a large-scale challenge and a long-term project. My view is that universities need to innovate and do more to support democracies and to resurrect their credibility. But how?

Pathways of Influence

To state the obvious, the role of universities in society and their level of autonomy are largely subjugated to the national political world they operate in. That role is conditioned by what might be termed the indicators or values of healthy democracies, including equitable and impartial rule of law and explicit civil rights, a free *and* responsible news and media sector, an independent civil society, fair elections, stable economies, and trusted governments and public institutions.

A university can be both a vital player as well as an influencer in the vitality of democracies. Yet it is important to note that these institutions in themselves cannot offer a magic bullet to sustain, or restore, or reinvent functioning democracies. Their role is nuanced and multiple. (Let's ignore for now historical instances of universities as catalysts and centers for resistance against autocratic governments — roles that may be more difficult to replicate in the age of the autocratic technological surveillance state.)

Those realities noted, within liberal democracies there are numerous paths for universities to elevate their constructive role in supporting and promoting open societies and democracy. They can do better at educating future citizens and leaders about the value and mechanisms of healthy democracies; they can more clearly voice their role as open markets for political and social ideas, and pursue policies for that cause; they can increase their output of research and knowledge production that is relevant to local communities, from scientific exploration of the local impact of climate change and studies to mitigate socioeconomic disparities, to the history and culture of a region.

Universities can also seek to expand public service engagement including ways to better support public institutions and services, and, one hopes, their efficiency and credibility; they can become more active players in life-long learning and other forms of educational services that meet public needs and expand their networks and influence.

These institutions also offer paths for international engagement and networks that can help local communities better understand the larger world, value cultural diversity, and, in some instances, help meet local labor and other economic needs. Universities also play an increasingly important role in promoting regional economic health. Historically, the collapse of economies, or severe economic dislocation for sizable portions of a nation's population, has provided the pre-conditions for fascism and other forms of autocratic rule — part of the formula for nationalism gone haywire (Galston and Kamarck, 2022). In their book *Why Nations Fail*, Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson outline this relationship between economic prosperity and political accountability (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012).

Universities can and should be paths for socioeconomic mobility, for easing income inequality; they act as producers of educated citizens, skilled labor, and new knowledge that supports economic growth and competent governments; they act as a constructive social critic important for maintaining political accountability. No other institution, public or private, plays such a multifaceted and critical role for democratic societies. Global challenges almost always have a local dimension. Here lies a pathway for universities.

Finally, academic communities can and often do provide constructive criticism of society and political actors and their policies. They can function as "truthsayers" that confront or at least attempt to expose the dangerous rhetoric of populists and demagogues and their followers who seek to erode democratic societies. More generally, academic communities can provide nuance and insight around the challenges facing society. This is a critical role, whether it pertains to relatively healthy liberal democracies or to democracies threatening to slide toward more autocratic regimes, as well as to actual autocracies — while recognizing the limits of this role when faced with nascent and fully blown security states.

It is important to note that vibrant open societies are not only dependent on institutional mechanisms and agents, like free elections, the rule of law, and courts that uphold civil liberties; they are also dependent on a culture of participatory citizenship, of tolerance and inclusion, and a semblance of socioeconomic equality and opportunity. Within this broader concept, contemporary universities are unique institutions due to the variety of ways they can constructively promote democracies and civil society — although admittedly with occasional complicated political consequences and demands for financial resources.

I like to say that those universities that see themselves as leading regional and national institutions should contemplate how, in some way, they can positively impact the life of every citizen, whether in a region, state, or nation, or some other definition of their stakeholders and the communities they are intended to serve.

For brevity, here I focus on two "interventions": expanding the research and knowledge production portfolio of universities, and the need to vastly improve communication and, one hopes, persuasion and legitimacy in shaping public discourse and policy. The goal is to urge universities to become more impactful and visible institutions, and to improve public discourse. This is no easy task. The reality is that universities, perhaps like other examples of proposed sites of intervention in this book, have limited ways to directly or immediately positively impact democracies: there can only be multiple and holistic approaches that are long-term projects.

Research for the Public Good

Universities need to coherently and purposefully expand research and outreach that benefits economic and social prosperity within a geographic area that constitutes its constituency. Many universities are doing this in some form, but not with enough focus, and with limited concepts of socioeconomic engagement.

As noted previously, one obstacle is an internal academic culture that undervalues local engagement. Overwhelmed by the mantra of global rankings and international citation indexes as indicators of quality, universities and their academic communities need a partial pivot to improve their local impact and profile. University hiring and advancement policies

and practices need to place greater value on research focused on local and regional challenges. These often relate to global challenges articulated in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals that could be applied at the local level, although obviously not exclusively.

In addition to the deleterious impact of rankings and their progeny, the "World Class University" model, another feature of academic culture is the historical importance of university autonomy from the political and economic world that surrounds them. There has been much consternation about utilitarian views and the entanglements presented by greater engagement with society. But it is simply not an either-or conundrum; with proper governance structures, internal policies and behaviors, universities can expand their impact judiciously.

More specifically, universities need to develop policies and practices that give greater clarity to the roles and expectations of faculty in meeting the university's mission. Any credible effort requires a process of faculty-driven pre- and post-tenure peer review, and should not be based on a civil service mentality in which faculty advancement is largely a factor of seniority. It also requires a nuanced understanding and validation of research activity, including the concept of engaged scholarship.

Hiring and promotion also needs to focus on a record and promise of creativity and innovation — not simply quantity. This means altering a culture fixated in a narrow concept of economic impact tied to citation rankings. Within a research university, faculty activity can be conceptualized in eight areas: teaching, mentoring, research, academic entrepreneurship, professional competence, professional activity, university service, and public service or engagement. Theoretically, the weighting will vary depending on faculty members' disciplines, interests, abilities, and the stage of their academic careers.

Shaping faculty behavior requires a significant institutional effort and a culture of self-improvement among academics that values public engagement in a variety of forms. It means resisting the reductionist focus on citations currently promoted by university leadership as well as governments in the quest for better commercial rankings. The gist is that in many universities there is a misalignment of the mission and internal culture of faculty and researchers that needs to be addressed to better promote the societies they are intended to serve.

Universities also need to think more systematically about their communication strategies and their powers of persuasion. An obvious task is to formulate with more clarity who the stakeholders are for a university and the communities they wish to help and speak to, whether in Hamburg or Berkeley.

One way to do this is a greater integration of local academics and university staff into local media, government proceedings, and public events that encourage dialogue. Here they can translate research, scientific findings, knowledge, and resources to local needs and concerns. At the same time, faculty, and universities more generally, need to carefully balance their roles as researchers and creators of knowledge and expertise with their potential role as political advocates.

Universities also need to have both campus-wide and discipline-based (e.g., medical centers) communication plans supported by professional staff, some of whom focus on government relations and integrating academic research into local and national policy discussions, others on internal university communications. Such communication plans should always include alumni relations and an understanding that students are tremendously important for leveraging support for universities and elevating their credibility via curricular innovations like service-learning courses and student volunteering and internships in local government, schools, and the private sector.

Some academics have good instincts for making their research understandable to the public, but many do not. And many need encouragement and assistance. THE NEW INSTITUTE's Founding Director Wilhelm Krull and his colleague Thomas Brunotte observe that "universities are still committed to a linear sender-receiver model of communications," and advocate that "an open dialogue replace the traditional monologue" (Krull and Brunotte, 2021).

How well or how poorly academics communicate with the larger world was the subject of a study published by the National Academy of Sciences in the US. In short, universities need a greater understanding and appreciation for why some people are "anti-science" and distrust

public institutions (Philipp-Muller et al., 2022). The report states that universities should focus more of their research efforts and services (like consulting with local governments) on topics that are directly relevant to local and regional communities; further, that local academic actors, including faculty and graduate students who live in and are part of the community, should have greater empathy when engaging with stakeholders.

The National Academy of Sciences report also observes that university actors need to consider the social identities and ways of thinking of the various communities they hope to influence (for example, climate change deniers): there is often a "mismatch between the delivery of the scientific message and the recipient's epistemic style." Academic communities should think in nuanced ways and, frankly, more analytically about their powers of persuasion. As one of the co-authors says, "Pro-science messages can acknowledge that there are valid concerns on the other side but explain why the scientific position is preferable" (ibid.).

Universities, and their academic communities, need to focus some of their efforts on "government relations." This includes engaging directly with lawmakers and government staff, tracking legislation, and seeking paths for lobbying in the halls of government, whether to preserve academic freedom and the autonomy of institutions or to seek funding. Universities in liberal democracies have tended to avoid such proactive strategies, seeing their distance from the political fray as a value that helps preserve their autonomy. But this is increasingly a naive view. To preserve democracy, universities need to be more strategically engaged in the process and to act as influencers. And in doing so, seek to build coalitions of like-minded universities.

The credibility gap that universities face in the modern world has led to a nascent series of ventures. Here I note a few examples.

With repeated political attacks on its autonomy and successive state budget cuts to its campus, the academic leadership at the University of Wisconsin–Madison is seeking a path to "fix its public image" (Knox, 2024). This includes a university conducted survey of how voters view the university, and, in turn, a public campaign intended for Wisconsin voters to counter perceptions that the university is "elitist" and insular — in part

to demonstrate the multiple ways that university research and students are engaged in community efforts to manage climate change, expand health care services, and the like.

At my university, the University of California, Berkeley, there are initiatives and programs that engage government partners, community leaders, and citizens in the pursuit of formulating largely local policies related to climate change, healthcare, voting participation, housing, violent crime, and other challenges. One example is the "Possibility Lab" that organizes interactions with community members in the region and compiles their concerns and observations to systematically translate them into quantitative measures and policy initiatives. "Communities most directly harmed by broken systems are often left out of conversations about how to make change," explain the project's founding directors. "Developing new ways to ensure communities have a meaningful voice in the policies that affect them can move us towards a more holistic, stakeholder-engaged reimagining of our public systems." The title of two of the lab's projects indicates the breadth of its agenda: Reimagining Public Safety in the City of Oakland and Understanding the Conditions for Success in Permanent Supportive Housing.[2]

At the University of St. Gallen (HSG) in Switzerland, a privately financed building called SQUARE is a self-titled "experiment" to create a "public place for encounters and a forum for dialogue between science, society, business, politics, and culture". Opened in early 2022, the objective is to gather "outstanding minds from business, politics and culture [to] meet students, lecturers and HSG alumni. In the 21st century, ideas and innovations are created in teams, at the interface of different perspectives, interests and biographies."[3]

2   For more information on UC Berkeley's Possibility Lab and how it is encouraging democracy, see its website: https://possibilitylab.berkeley.edu/our-work/initiatives/

3   For more information on SQAURE, see the website: https://www.unisg.ch/en/newsdetail/news/square-the-newest-building-at-the-university-of-stgallen-where-the-future-of-learning-and-teaching-is-explored/

Admittedly, reaching out and finding productive ways to engage with disaffected communities, such as conservatives who doubt the reality of climate change, is a more difficult challenge. The argument here is that universities need to become more systematic in their efforts to positively influence society and to elevate their credibility as they face an increasingly cynical view of their place in society.

A "Truthsayer" Role

Yet universities cannot be all things to all people. As I've indicated, their power of persuasion has limits. Hard-core extremists on the left and the right, for example, have world views that are largely unshakable in the near-term and perhaps even in the long-term. This is not to diminish the critical role of universities as truthsayers. Through research and advocacy, universities can and do play a vital role in contradicting or correcting gross mistruths or even nuanced lies and false claims that are damaging to democracies.

This is not an easy task in a world of false narratives that will only increase with advances in AI and increasingly sophisticated deepfakes. Indeed, understanding the past and future impact of social media and technologies such as AI is a major challenge for society.

At the same time, the viability of the truthsayer role relies on an expanded portfolio of engagement with society and on the credibility of the academic community with the public. Academic communities need to work harder to be overtly and visibly inclusive public squares for constructive debate via public events and through their teaching and research programs. Messaging this mission to the public needs to be a central tenant.

While I have focused here on local engagement and skills of constructive communication, I do not mean to downplay the role of universities as sanctuaries for "blue-sky research" untethered by the wants and demands of a larger world. Nor as participants in what is an evolving global science and knowledge system. They are important conduits for integrating global perspectives at the local level. Universities are key players in

science diplomacy and in providing contact and support with academics and institutions facing persecution in an increasing number of illiberal democracies and autocratic regimes.

Reflecting geopolitical tensions, we are sliding toward a neo-academic cold war. War, trade sanctions, and new and renewed geopolitical rivalries are shaping how universities interact globally. Universities in the EU have appropriately ended all exchange and research engagements with Russia's universities; China's expanded and severe security state and soft-power efforts abroad, and the fear of academic espionage, is hindering academic collaborations; the wars in Ukraine and in Gaza, and political repression in Hong Kong, Turkey, and elsewhere, are creating a new academic diaspora.

The result of these relatively new tensions is a further divide and isolation of academics caught between rival global players — one leaning autocratic and one that leans toward the values of open societies, with some nations attempting to be neutral or non-aligned. One can only hope that universities in working democracies, as in the past, help to mitigate this trend by fostering open dialogue and academic exchanges; they need to expand their influence and positive impact on their stakeholders. The headwinds are substantial.

Yet, as I have attempted to portray in this essay, no other institution, public or private, plays such a multifaceted and critical role for democratic nation-states as universities. And here lies an important opportunity. They can and must do more.

References

Acemoglu, D., & Robinson, J. (2012). *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*. Crown.

Douglass, J. A. (2023, March 4). New ideas in the face of rankings and "world-class" fatigue. *University World News*.

Douglass, J. A. (Ed.). (2021). *Neo-Nationalism and Universities: Populists, Autocrats, and the Future of Higher Education*. Johns Hopkins University Press, Open Access Project Muse.

Galston W. A., & Kamarck, E. (2022, January 4). Is Democracy Failing and Putting Our Economic System at Risk? Brookings Institute.

Knox, L. (2024, March 19). Can a Marketing Push Solve UW Madison's Political Woes? *Inside Higher Ed*. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/government/state-policy/2024/03/19/uw-madisons-marketing-push-against-politicization

Krull, W. & Brunotte, T. (2021). Turbulent Times: Intellectual and Institutional Challenges for Universities in Germany, Hungary, and Poland. In John Aubrey Douglass (Ed.), *Neo-Nationalism and Universities: Populists, Autocrats, and the Future of Higher Education*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Open Access Project Muse.

Philipp-Muller, A., Petty, R. E., & Lee, S. W. S. (2022, July 12). Why are people antiscience, and what can we do about it?. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 119(30). https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2120755119

Repucci, S. (2015, August 3). Democracy Is Good for Business. Freedom House.