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Silencing dissent in academia The commercialisation of science

UNIVERSITIES and the academic community have been largely silenced as a source of dissent and independent critical thought. Why has this happened? What can we do about it?

The rot set in with the release of the free market in Britain throughout the 1980s; publicly owned assets were privatised, unions attacked and the financial markets were deregulated in the big bang. Cumulatively this allowed the transfer of resources from the bulk of the populace to a tiny and increasingly rich minority. This resulted in a growth of corporate sponsorship and increased government control over research findings and over the research agenda itself.

We are not psychologists, but given the applicability of psychological research to a range of controversial social issues we hope that the opinions we express in this article will serve to spur discussion in *The Psychologist* on how the commercialisation of science affects your discipline.

Corporate sponsorship In the 1980s funding regimes changed – especially for scientific research – and academics became increasingly close to the market. Declining public funding for research, together with the advent of the new genetics and biotechnology, resulted in scientists changing titles from Research Director to Chief Executive Officer and their research centres becoming commercialised.

In the absence of proper public funding UK universities have increasingly accepted corporate sponsorship and donations. The donation by Bill Gates of £50 million to Cambridge University is perhaps the most well known, but there are corporate donations across the social and natural sciences. Cambridge University also received £19.5 million from BP for a professorship and institute of petroleum sciences and £13 million from Unilever for a centre in molecular sciences. It also boasts The Glaxo Institute of Applied Pharmacology, the Guinness professor of management studies, and the Price Waterhouse Coopers chair in financial accounting. Around 30 of the 200

professors at Nottingham University hold sponsored chairs. British American Tobacco has ploughed £3.8 million into Nottingham University for – of all things – a Centre for Corporate Social Responsibility. In our own field of media and communications, Oxford University has accepted £3.1 million for the ‘Rupert Murdoch’ chair in language and communication and the ‘News International’ chair in broadcast media; Salford University has a Corporate Communication Unit named after and funded by British Nuclear Fuels; British American Tobacco donated £50,000 to sponsor a master’s degree in strategic communications at UMIST. As universities move closer to being businesses, how well is the public interest served?

Government control of research findings As things stand now almost all British government departments have clauses in their research contracts that allow civil servants to amend or censor results. Research for the Department for Education and Employment, for example, required researchers to ‘incorporate the department’s amendments’ (Cohen, 2000).

Academics have become unable to comment critically on the key issues of their own society (Philo & Miller, 2001). If they do they risk punishment, as a number of high-profile cases in both the UK and North America have shown (Zoll, 2001). One prominent case involved British

psychopharmacologist David Healy, whose job offer in Toronto University was withdrawn after he made a speech on the potential dangers of Prozac. Eli Lilly, the company that makes the drug, had funded research in the university, and it has been alleged that this was connected with the withdrawal of the job (Boseley, 2001).

Governments setting the research agenda Pressure on academics to bring in money also leads them to conform to the research priorities of funding bodies. Schlesinger (2001) notes that current Research Council scientific policy sees the purpose of academic output as being to contribute to the UK’s economic performance. He cites a speech by David Blunkett, as Secretary of State for Education and Employment. It was entitled ‘Influence or Irrelevance’ and suggested that social science research should become a service industry for government policy making. As Schlesinger notes, it comes down to saying ‘make yourself useful on my terms’. It is no surprise then that recent headlines on the damage being done to schoolchildren by the government’s intensive regime of tests came from research commissioned by a trade union backed by a children’s charity. The report from the Professional Association of Teachers suggested that children were being ‘tested to destruction’ with serious implications for their long-term education and health (Carver, 2000).

Critical research

Along with these pressures of commercialisation, some of the damage was self-inflicted as academics in the social sciences moved into the dead ends of ‘postmodern’ theory. This approach, with its endless capacity for speculation and contemplation, involved the abandoning of empirical research and the gathering of evidence necessary for social critique. Such approaches have affected a very wide range of social science and humanities disciplines including psychology, where a specialism in ‘discursive psychology’ has emerged. In line with discursive approaches across the



social sciences these bracket off reality and focus largely on the analysis of texts, leading to an inability to discuss material determinants of psychological states. For example, discursive approaches suffer from the inability to analyse increasing inequality and cultural degradation in the context of rising levels of depression and mental illness (James, 1998).

Some critical voices do remain in research funded by independent charitable trusts such as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, but their resources are tiny compared to government and commercially funded research. This is all the more frustrating given that there is no shortage of critical issues to discuss. In the education debate as a whole, there is very little debate on what education can or should achieve. What is it actually for? Is it meant to impart life skills and values, to show children how to live full and purposeful lives, to produce concerned and thoughtful citizens, to appreciate art and culture? Or, more mundanely, how to avoid pregnancy and drugs, read bus timetables or count their change? Or is the whole thing simply intended to prepare people for the workforce? In the face of these complex questions, politicians mostly avoid them and instead grasp at current shibboleths on whatever can look like the quest for academic excellence. Such priorities are rarely questioned in public life.

Cultural degradation and academic silence

The release of the free market produced a rise in inequality and violence, the development of a huge criminal economy and the degradation of social and cultural life. But where are the academic voices on these issues? There is a sustained public debate about the 'dumbing down' of television, yet most media and cultural studies have little to add to this. To do so would require an empirical study of factors such as the influence of deregulation and specific changes such as the 1990 Broadcasting Act. This effectively removed quality thresholds from independent television and enabled franchises to be given on the basis of who paid the most for them. Thus TV was only about money, and its executives had the green light to do whatever was necessary to hold viewers' attention long enough to sell them something. The result was stimulation television – the biggest earthquakes, the worst car crashes, the tackiest jokes, the most intrusive flies on the wall. We deplore casual violence and laddism in the real

world, and then watch as they are used as a marketing device to gather young viewers.

Along with stimulation television goes the obsession with fame and interpersonal success. The desire to be 'seen' is central in a society obsessed with fame and glamour. It produces the widespread desire to work in television or films, or simply to be seen on television. To attract attention, to be the focus of other people's gaze, is a mark of success and a form of power. In a media-saturated society some will do anything to get on television, even if it means being humiliated. Criminologist Mike Presdee (1997) has written of 'humiliation television', citing programmes such as *Blind Date*:

Here we have young people persuaded to divulge to the viewing public the innermost secrets of their partner for the week. Not acted out but in 'real life'. What are their weaknesses, how can we laugh at them. How can we strip them of their dignity. Embarrassment and humiliation is the name of the game.

The driving force in the market is to attract – the priority is the ratings. The rise of 'fly-on-the-wall' and 'reality' television are cases in point, although of course the terms are a misnomer. There is no fly on the wall, but a television crew filming what is clearly no longer reality but merely a construction for the cameras.

Psychologists and 'reality' TV

Construction in reality television reached a high point with the first screening of *Big Brother* in 2000. Contestants for a prize of

£70,000 (not to mention the opportunities for self-promotion and fame) were confined to a house with no access to the outside world and with their every moment caught on camera. Each week the contestants were required to vote for which of their fellow inmates should be ejected. Viewers of the show were then invited to decide which of the shortlisted candidates was removed. It was evident from early on that being on the show was distressing for a number of the participants. The first to leave, Sada Walkington, noted: 'Being cooped up in a space with nowhere to run and nowhere to hide takes its toll. It was a very harsh environment to live in. It was an emotionally intense cocoon' (quoted in McVeigh, 2000). One of the psychologists involved talked at length about the contestants in relation to the Stockholm syndrome, which is the alleged effect whereby captives come to love their captors. Partly to allay fears of damage to the participants, as well as to give the programme a pseudo-scientific gloss, the programme makers recruited a number of professional psychologists to help.

Although the presence of the psychologists may have conferred a patina of legitimacy, there seemed to have been inadequate psychological screening of the contestants. One claimed on *Panorama* that he had seen a psychologist for only 40 minutes prior to entering the house. The British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) has reported that its helpline has received 'many calls from those who have appeared in such shows or watched them with dismay. Participants have talked about the lack of preparation

they experienced in coping with the demands of the media, the impact of public recognition and managing their return to everyday life' (BACP, 2000).

All this raises ethical questions about the participation of psychologists (or other academics) in humiliation television, particularly when academics have a duty of care to their research participants and are required to gain informed consent from them. Unfortunately commercial priorities (in this case those of the TV and advertising industries) have displaced the scientific pursuit of knowledge and the psychologists involved are just along for the ride – could they have stopped the *Big Brother* juggernaut if they thought it damaging to the research participants/game-show contestants?

An even more worrying example is the BBC programme *The Experiment*, which was based partly on the Stanford prison experiment. In the original 1971 study, university students were 'imprisoned' and fellow students became 'guards'. The experiment was stopped after six days when the guards' behaviour descended into sadism. Philip Zimbardo, who oversaw the original experiment, said it should never be repeated. The BBC experiment overseen by British academic psychologists was also terminated early, with *The Guardian* reporting concerns about the well-being of the participants (Wells, 2002). In the same report, Zimbardo commented: 'That kind of research is now considered unethical and should not be redone just for sensational TV and *Survivor*-type glamour. I am amazed a British university psychology department would be involved'.

Furthermore it is clear that psychologists themselves can be misled in their participation in such programmes. The BACP reports a case where 'the production company made false promises to the programme psychologist who was still included in the final edit although she had disassociated herself from the enterprise' (BACP, 2002).

Of course the BPS does have its Code of Conduct, but as with much self-regulation the Code currently applies only to members of the Society. More

importantly, it appears ill equipped to deal with the conduct of psychologists in the public sphere: the Code seems primarily aimed at regulating psychologist–client relationships and has no explicit, direct discussion of psychologists' role in the media.

One of the authors of this piece took a complaint against some psychologists

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working in this arena. The complaint was rejected, but in our view the process was inadequate: the complainant was given no opportunity to examine the evidence given to the committee, and the reasons for rejecting the complaint were not given on the grounds of protecting confidentiality. We understand that the procedure has now been changed and that some feedback is now given. We welcome this, but there is a need for greater transparency of the procedure and for urgent revision of the Code to explicitly address the role of psychologists in the media. Currently, we feel that the Code is not up to the job of regulating psychologists in the increasingly commercialised academic world.

The way forward

If academics are to give any lead or guidance on such pressing social issues, the universities and research councils must assert their independence from the state. In September 2000 the Economic and Social Research Council hosted a special session at the British Academy on public understanding of science. A central concern at the meeting was the growing public distrust of scientists, especially those linked with government policy. To this was added the issue that scientists may have a vested interest (for example, through share options) in the actual products whose value or safety they are asked to comment on. One of the proposals raised in the resulting debate was that members of the academic and scientific communities should agree to a form of Hippocratic oath in which they undertook not to act against the public interest. It is a measure of the seriousness of the current situation that such a proposal should be raised.

Recently the editors of 15 leading

neurology journals signed a declaration demanding that corporate sponsorship of research be declared and that authors are free to publish any and all of their data whatever the views of the sponsor. The editors stated: 'Corporate sponsors must not be allowed to influence publication, or indeed prevent it, especially where the data are not supportive their product. Authors, editors, and industry sponsors are aware of these matters and it is now time to address them' (Abergavenny, 2002).

There is a need for initiatives such as this across academic world. An additional and necessary reform would be that the protocols of research councils should have the criteria of public interest and the independent evaluation of policy clearly stated as the guiding purpose of research – these should have priority over criteria such as 'economic growth' and 'policy relevance'. The public interest is not at all the same as the generation of wealth and making ourselves useful to policy makers and gameshows.

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What are your views as psychologists? Is the commercialisation of science affecting our discipline? If so, send us examples. If not, why not? Contact the letters page on psychologist@bps.org.uk.