

Trouble making and whistleblowing.

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They said I was a trouble maker. ‘They’ are some colleagues at Bournemouth University who used the term to tick off my departure from there after 18 years. How does one take this soubriquet – tough compliment or snide insult? I took it in one of two ways, knowing who said it: as joshing by friendly colleagues on my career as an academic who claims to challenge the conventional wisdom of his discipline; and who was a trade union activist for the whole period. Some other colleagues threw the term at me as an insult.

A ‘trouble maker’ is, I think, a lesser species of the genus ‘whistleblower’, and it may not therefore brew up the more intense ethical questions of the latter social role. But inside my minor and errant status, I did feel the pricks of conscience.

As soon as I say that I teach and research into public relations, I bet that I have your sympathy. The practice of PR has a dubious reputation in the world of work. In the academy of established disciplines, it is almost a non-subject, one not fit for seminar room space on a proper campus. Even from media studies, it gets hostility as devil’s work stopping journalists save democracy. All this scholarly hostility despite some 30 UK universities offering the subject at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

I could have avoided trouble if I espoused the existing paradigm of PR thinking: PR is about two way symmetrical communications. Instead, I reverted to an earlier paradigm associated with the great non-person of PR, Edward Bernays: PR is propaganda.

What were the issues of ethical unease for me? The first one was regards my PR academic colleagues. One of their self-imposed tasks is to propagate the New Model Public Relations of Two Way Symmetry, first elaborated by the American academics Grunig and Hunt in 1984. One Australian colleague revealed an incident which suggests a lot about disciplinary sensitivities; he was told by an American academic to stop dissenting publicly from the Grunigian paradigm in a conference paper while the subject was finding its feet on campus.

He did not and I never have. But I have a lingering sense of residual disloyalty to the majority of colleagues who take Grunig’s view. Would you feel unease about disciplinary nonconformity in similar circumstances? Or am I being thin skinned? Or is ‘ethical unease’ my comforting euphemism for feeling a lonely dissenter? Or is there some pride to be had from the notoriety of being out of step?

More intense than these professional micro feelings are larger ones connected with teaching propaganda in a democracy. After the Fascist and Nazi wars; after Orwell’s Animal Farm; after the capitalist and communist cold war, semantic apartheid

squeezed out of our vocabulary any benign use of the ‘propaganda’ word. It became a banned word; a non-word, four Latinate syllables unfit for any positive usage. PR’s many academic critics equate the subject with the ‘p’ word and its most negative usage. Could one justify teaching PR as this banned concept in a democracy? To the young and mostly naïve? How did I handle this as a loner in the teaching team?

Rather un-heroically, actually. I taught final year undergraduates and MAs and introduced them to PR-as-propaganda as a conclusion to be reached via debate about the communicative economy. I referred them to my books and articles and left them to their own conclusions.

But even so, is propaganda a communication practice eroding democracy? I developed a thesis which claims to avoid the erosion, and which substitutes for it the acceptability as well as inevitability of propaganda in a democracy.¹

In working through to this thesis, I had conceptual false starts and continuing worries about its validity. These experiences were unsettling, and sometimes had me wondering whether my efforts were just building conceptual castles in the air, an activity I could call that sacred thing, ‘research’. An academic vice is, I believe, self-absorption which inflates the importance of the subject studied. Do not laugh therefore when I pose the question – was I undermining the public good in trying to make compatible what all but a few thought were incompatibles, namely PR propaganda and democracy? Do other disciplines recognise these frissons of unease?

The unease of the trade union campus activist

I turn to ethical unease connected with being a trade union activist ‘trouble maker’. If academics can call themselves ethical because they search the truth, trade unionists can say they are ethical because they seek fairness at work. A unifier of these two roles is the aphorism of speaking truth to power. It is a palpable role when you face a powerful Vice Chancellor or Chair of University Board. If so far the phrase ‘ethical unease’ has appeared frequently, let ‘ethical ease’ now appear once or twice. On a campus devoted to knowledge and truth, it is good to keep power evenly distributed so as to allow a hundred searches for knowledge and truth to bloom. Or not. Helping create that environment produces ethical ease. I believe that NATFHE, AUT and UCU - intermittently - do that important distributive work. They are also ethically at ease when they take up cases of bullying, harassment, or plain unfair treatment against their members. This is academic social work.

But their role can produce ethical uneasiness in their activists. How do you deal with members who are not blameless, who are guilty of bad behaviour, e.g. sexual relations with students, plagiarism? The standard behaviour for the activist in these cases is to adopt the lawyerly approach of presumption of innocence until the client admits otherwise. But this is wearing after a while and is a gearing mechanism for case worker cynicism. Should ethical case officers instead refuse cases after exploring with the colleague in question culpability? Tell me that I am wrong to conclude that such case diligence will lose the union membership and will offend the rough justice principle that ‘every dog has its day in court’?

¹ Briefly it is that competing interest groups seek communicative advantage via factually biased and moderately emotional messages to achieve their goals. Some groups are more powerful than others in sending PR messages and communication resource subsidies are needed for the less powerful to create a messaging level playing field.

Secondly, there is the ‘closed mind’ syndrome of groups. The ethical questions here are whether and how often the activist should puncture the happy camaraderie of committee and branch meetings to ask about ‘awkward thinking outside the box’; about seeing some good in management proposals; about arguing a case and not kicking the man. It is lame to say ‘go with the flow’ but that usually happens. The ethical unease here is the complacency of staying silent, and doing a disservice to your cause, because silence does not expose error in your policy.

Thirdly, there are the conflicting loyalties of membership of two institutions – the university and the union. You feel this conflict most strongly when you are talking to the press, and are publicly criticising the institution which provides the wherewithal to practise your profession. But unlike the last point, there is a working solution to this unease. It is to make distinctions between the university as a corporate expression of our truth-seeking professional ideals and as the management class of that corporate body; and then to exercise constitutional methods of dissent against that class in order to be loyal to the campus as a location for truth searching. It is an empowering distinction for the dissenter.

That point allows me to return to the academic whistleblower, for he, she and the union activist can often be one and the same person and these two roles are invigorated and united by the possibility of finding distinctions on which to base ethical behaviour in conflictual situations.

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