

ACADEMIA AND THE POLICY WORLD NEVER THE TWIN SHALL MEET?

BY TIMOTHY FRYE

One of the Harriman Institute's central missions is to use academic research to inform public policy debates. This sounds noble and straightforward, but tensions quickly emerge. Academia rewards peer-reviewed publications rather than op-eds in the *New York Times* or policy pieces in *Foreign Affairs*. Academic articles—let alone books—take years to write, while policy moves quickly. Academics prize nuance, while policy makers want clear answers. Scholars face real trade-offs in their decision to target an academic or a policy-making audience.

Many of these tensions remain, but, over the last decade, the way that scholars interact with the policy-making community has changed dramatically. I finished graduate school in 1997 and took up a faculty position at Ohio State, a university with a long history of excellence in Slavic studies and a top-15 political science department. The unspoken advice for new faculty members was to avoid writing about contemporary policy issues. Doing so was thought to detract from the more serious research required to publish in top academic outlets.

This was good advice then and remains so today. Earning tenure at research universities and liberal arts colleges

alike requires publication in prestigious academic outlets. And academic publishing is hard. Top academic journals have acceptance rates in the single digits, and the review process can be slow. Articles submitted to academic journals undergo an initial round of review by two to three outside experts that can take four to six months. Most submissions are rejected at this stage, but some will receive a coveted “revise and resubmit” recommendation from an editor and undergo a second round of reviews that often takes another three to four months. If the article is accepted, the finished version will then take its place in a journal's queue and eventually see the light of day in another six to twelve months. Book publishing can be equally slow but with higher stakes, due to the much longer lead times needed to write a book. Given that time is an academic's most scarce commodity, and tenure is an up or down decision with long-term consequences, it is not surprising that younger scholars have historically been encouraged to focus on academic rather than policy-oriented publications.

Senior scholars also have disincentives to engage in policy debates. Prestige typically flows from publication in high-quality

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Photo by Eileen Barroso

Opposite page, left to right: Timothy Frye with Professors Jack Snyder, Kimberly Marten, Valery Kuchynsky, and Alexander Cooley on a panel about the global implications of the Ukraine crisis; Timothy Frye introducing Michael McFaul, former U.S. ambassador to Russia



academic outlets, and competition to publish is fierce for them as well. In addition, senior scholars often bear significant administrative burdens on top of their teaching and research responsibilities; while many of them would like to address policy issues, they are often too squeezed for time.

Yet, two factors have changed the landscape for academics seeking to influence policy. The rise of social media has given scholars a way to communicate their knowledge quickly. Younger scholars have been particularly savvy in marketing their research. Blog platforms, Twitter, and Facebook are used to alert policy makers and scholars alike to new research and provide quick takes on the issues of the day. Even a relative dinosaur like me has a Twitter account (follow me @timothymfrye).

The second and more important trend has been the rise of data-journalism and evidence-based policy advocacy. The *Upshot* in the *New York Times*, *WonkBlog* at the *Washington Post*, and websites like Vox.com and Nate Silver's 538.com have come to play an important role in translating social science research into bite-sized pieces targeted for nonacademic audiences. Rather than publishing op-eds or *Foreign Affairs*-style articles where a

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scholar picks a side in a policy debate or calls for attention to a new policy issue, these outlets convert academic research into digestible short reads that provide links to the underlying research for those who want to dig into the details.

For scholars of postcommunism, one of the most important outlets has become the *Monkey Cage* at the *Washington Post*. Founded by five social scientists, including Andy Gelman from Columbia and Joshua Tucker from New York University, the website takes its name from the H. L. Mencken quotation: "Democracy is the art of running the circus from the monkey cage."

While the *Monkey Cage* publishes articles on all geographic regions, it has a strong interest in Eurasia. Its articles on the postcommunist region tend to fall into two categories. When a new policy issue arises, scholars of the region are often

able to draw on deep academic knowledge to put that issue into a richer historical context. For example, when the prospect of a Russian move into Crimea arose in early 2014, Gwendolyn Sasse drew on her Harvard University Press book on Crimea, published in 2008, to highlight the range of interests at play on the Crimean peninsula. Similarly, Ralph Clem brought his years of research on regionalism in Ukraine to discussions of voting patterns in Ukraine following the fall of the Yanukovich government.

Another type of article draws on recent academic research that sheds light on a particularly pressing policy issue. For example, President Putin's stunningly high public approval ratings have become an important source of legitimacy for the Kremlin, but some Russia watchers in academia and the policy-making community have speculated that his



Pictured below: Timothy Frye with Michael McFaul, former U.S. ambassador to Russia; *opposite page:* Timothy Frye participating in a panel discussion on the legacy of Václav Havel

support was inflated because respondents were lying to pollsters. With three colleagues, I conducted two surveys using a special technique designed to detect dissembling by respondents and found only scant evidence that respondents were hiding their true preferences about President Putin. Editors at the *Monkey Cage* picked up on this research and wrote a short post.

Not all *Monkey Cage* posts translate academic research for a general audience, and some veer much closer to traditional op-eds, but the format works best

when scholars are able to draw on deep knowledge of the region or on recent academic research to help inform policy making. To my mind, scholars are best positioned to inform policy debates when they have done the heavy lifting of academic research, even as they are called on to give opinions on topics where we are less than expert.

These new outlets are generally not without problems. One potential shortcoming is that research can be published without undergoing peer review. While every academic complains



about the length and unpredictability of the peer review process (often with good reason), it does provide a check on the credibility of academic research. In addition, not all top-notch academic research lends itself to clear policy solutions and short sound bites.

For the Harriman these new opportunities play to our strengths. Our faculty—including Kimberly Marten, Alexander Cooley, and me—have been especially active on these fora. In addition, four of my graduate students have used the *Monkey Cage* to discuss their research

on topics ranging from how the Internet shapes political protest in Russia to how to integrate Syrian refugees in Turkey.

One thing that has not changed is that politics are driven by much more than the scribblings of academics. There are real limits to what scholars can accomplish via these new outlets as policy making (and not just foreign policy) in Washington is deeply polarized. The voices of academics must compete for the attention of policy makers with long-established and well-funded interest groups, foreign governments using public relations firms

to press their views, and think tanks claiming foreign policy expertise. But the rise of new media platforms at least gives academics a chance to be heard by those who are willing to listen. ■

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