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Geraint Osborne

University of Alberta, Augustana Campus

Shauna Wilton

University of Alberta, Augustana Campus

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Professing in the Local Press: Professors and Public Responsibilities

Geraint Osborne and Shauna Wilton

Abstract

This research examines the role of professors and print media within small communities, the town-and-gown relationship between universities and the broader communities they inhabit, and the nature of the public discourse on important social issues on community, provincial, national, and international levels. Since 1996, professors at a small Canadian liberal arts and sciences university have contributed to and supported an op-ed column in a local newspaper serving a small rural and conservative city. Using survey research and personal interviews, this research attempts to understand the motivations of these professors to write columns and explores their understandings of what it means to be a public intellectual. This case study contributes to the literature on the sociology of intellectuals, and especially the study of academics and their roles as public intellectuals within modern universities and the broader communities they inhabit and in which they are engaged.

Introduction

On November 6, 1996, a new feature designated “Educated Guess” appeared in the then independently owned weekly *Camrose Canadian* newspaper in the small rural city of Camrose, Alberta and its surrounding area. The inaugural column, entitled “The Public Intellectual,” announced that the weekly column would be maintained by professors working at the local liberal arts postsecondary institution, Augustana University College, in an attempt “to revive the tradition of the public intellectual,” and “bring to the Camrose public some of the ideas and knowledge” that were being generated by “Camrose’s own university.” Moreover, the column stated that it explicitly hoped to breach the wall “separating the intellectual from the public” and in so doing, help strengthen town-gown relations in the small conservative city (Janz, Bateman, & Milbrandt, 1996). A week later, a letter to the editor entitled “Hail the Intellectuals,” signaled the beginning of what would become a tenuous relationship between the university and the Camrose community, at least as it would be played out in the pages of both the *Camrose Canadian* and later the *Camrose Booster*. It read:

It is consoling and comforting to knoweth that we haveth in our midst the “three wise (intellectual) persons.” Our quality of life and standard of living, no doubt, is so much enhanceth by their enigmatic presence. Let us plebeians, in conjunction with our City’s Fathers, set aside a week, nay a month, next summer to rejoice our treasure and blessing. We could dust and

donneth our togas and sit on the lush river bank in wonderment (bewilderment?) as we heareth the sages impart the wisdom of the world and of life. Perhaps we may beholdeth the waters of Mirror Lake parted? Could this arrogance deservedly garnereth the distinction: “Piled Higher and Deeper?” (Bondar, 1996, p. A7)

So much for strengthening town-gown relations! With this inaugural column and its response, a troubled dialogue began and, for better or for worse, the column has been a mainstay of the Camrose local newspapers for the past 19 years. During this time, professors from the social sciences, humanities, fine arts, and sciences have contributed columns focusing on a wide range of topics and social issues. While not every column has generated a public response, some have created a genuine interest and encouraged a dialogue between the university faculty and community, as well as within the community itself.

Our research examines the role of professors and print media within small communities, the town-and-gown relationship between universities and the broader communities they inhabit, and the nature of the public discourse on important community, provincial, national, and international issues. The motivations and views of the professors who contribute to and support the column are analyzed through a survey and interviews exploring their understandings of what it means to be a public intellectual (although many dislike the use of this term, finding it pretentious). Case studies

such as this have a long and impressive record as a sound methodological approach in the social sciences. They are particularly noted for their ability to initiate the process of discovery (Mitchell, 1983; Yin, 2003a, 2003b). While researchers are limited by the generalizations they can draw, case studies are nonetheless especially useful for intensively examining and understanding a single case, engaging in theoretical analysis, and generating insights and hypotheses that may be explored in subsequent studies (Vaughn, 1992; Gomm, Hammersley, & Foster, 2000). As such, this case study contributes to the literature on the sociology of intellectuals, and especially the study of academics and their roles as public intellectuals within modern universities and the broader communities they engage and inhabit.

The Sociology of Public Intellectuals

While the modern notion of the intellectual has its roots in the work of the humanist scholars in the Renaissance era, the sociology of intellectuals as a field of study did not really begin to take shape until the Dreyfus affair (1894–1906), during which leaders of the anti-clerical and pro-republican camp, many of whom were teachers, students, and writers, protested the conduct of the Dreyfus trial and were referred to in the press as *les intellectuels* (Eyal & Buchloz, 2010; Brym, 1987; Drake, 2005). Since then, the sociology of intellectuals as a cohesive field of study has had its ebbs and flows, often being subsumed into other fields of study such as the sociology of knowledge, the sociology of science, and the sociology of professions (Kurzman & Owens, 2002; Li, 2010). Despite its peripheral nature, a great deal has been written on the sociology of intellectuals and the role of the public intellectual. The field comprises a diverse yet rich body of research that has focused on a wide range of topics, including historical examinations of intellectuals (Jennings & Kemp-Welsh, 1997; Judt, 1998; Wolin, 2004), efforts to define intellectuals (Mannheim, 1936; Coser, 1970; Bourdieu, 1988; Said, 1994; & Farganis, 2005), debates of the class nature of intellectuals (Benda, 1928; Gramsci, 1971; Mannheim, 1993; Shils, 1972; Mills, 1963; Foucault & Deleuze, 1973; Coser, 1970; Bourdieu, 1993; & Bauman, 1987), studies of the role of intellectuals in society and politics (Brym, 1980; Goldfarb, 1998; Said, 1994; Eyerman, 1994; Kowalchuk & McLaughlin, 2009; Lilla, 2001; McGowan, 2002; McLaughlin & Townsley, 2011), and examinations of the disappearance of public intellectuals in contemporary societies (Jacoby,

1987; Posner, 2001; Furedi, 2004; Jennings, 2005; & Collini, 2006).

Despite the richness of the field, the concept of a public intellectual is difficult to pin down, with definitions ranging from the narrow to the more general. The traditional sociological definitions of the intellectual tend to refer to intellectuals as a group defined by their primary occupational activity of developing and disseminating ideas or by their class positions and relationships with other social groups. For Mannheim (1949), the intellectual is a key player in the shaping of the modern social order and a “watchman in what otherwise would be a pitch-black night” (p. 143). Similarly, Habermas (1989) argues that public intellectuals are defined by their sense of duty to intervene on “behalf of rights and progress that has been delayed” (p. 73).

For Collini (2006), the term public intellectual refers to “those few academics who enjoy a significant media presence and who use the opportunity to address current political and social issues” (p. 231). Others view the media presence as less important than the actual daily process of being an academic in a democratic society. For example, Hacker (2010) maintains that most academics are public intellectuals if their research focuses on substantive issues that matter to others, have the ability to clearly communicate ideas, and have sufficient interest in devoting time and energy to the process of educating others. Similarly, Fallis (2008) argues that all academics are public intellectuals because they disseminate knowledge publicly when teaching in the classroom, through publishing and disseminating their research, and especially when they write and speak to explain their discipline and their research to the public. Misztal (2007) understands the term public intellectual to include those “scientists, academics in the humanities and the social and political sciences, writers, artists, and journalists who articulate issues of importance in their societies to the general public” (p. 1). As “democracy’s helpers” public intellectuals require both “creativity and courage” which are the foundational features of their authority to speak out on broad issues of public concern.

This more political conception of the public intellectual has been advocated by Said (1994), among others, who views an intellectual’s mission in life as breaking down stereotypes and advancing “human freedom and knowledge” (p. 17). This mission often requires intellectuals to adopt the role of the outsider who questions social

institutions, struggles on behalf of disadvantaged groups, and actively disturbs the status quo. The role has a particular edge to it in that intellectuals must raise embarrassing questions, confront orthodoxy and dogma, and “represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug... the whole point is to be embarrassing, contrary, and even unpleasant” (p. 11).

For the purposes of this research, a public intellectual is defined as a person who is trained in a particular discipline, is a member of a faculty of a college or university, who embraces the outsider role identified by scholars such as Said, and decides to communicate with a larger audience outside of the world of academia either on their own initiative or by invitation. Obviously, there are local, regional, national, and international audiences or publics available to the public intellectual and their success at reaching each is dependent on a range of factors, most notably the quality of their expertise, their public communication skills, and their desire to engage in the pursuit in the first place.

This case study seeks to get at this desire; to understand what motivates academics to become public intellectuals, even on a small scale, such as working on a small liberal arts and sciences university campus and engaging the public through writing in local newspapers. Little research has been devoted to understanding what actually motivates intellectuals, especially academics, to engage the public outside the university walls. This research seeks to fill this void.

Methodology

This research began in 2010 with an archival search to locate the original columns and letters to the editor between the years 1996 and 2009. To understand the motivations of professors to write columns, we use both a survey and a number of personal interviews that were conducted face-to-face and/or through email. Professors and non-academic staff at Augustana Campus were given a survey with five closed-ended and five open-ended questions. A total of 43 respondents answered the survey. The vast majority (N=39) were academic staff while the rest (N=4) were non-academic staff. Of the professors who responded to the survey, 41% had been employed at Augustana for 0–5 years, 20.5% for 6–10 years, 2.6% for 11–15 years, and 35.9% for over 15 years. In addition, the survey invited respondents who had written columns to be interviewed to discuss their views and experiences in more detail. Fourteen column writers consented to personal interviews.

The research focuses on two social groups located in a particular social environment. These are the professors working in the local university, the Augustana Campus of the University of Alberta, and the general public living in the city of Camrose and the surrounding rural Albertan area. Obviously, these two social groups are diverse, particularly in their social, political, economic, and religious views, but the columns and letters to the editor suggest that these groups fall into two opposing camps: the cosmopolitan secular left versus the rural religious right. The following section describes in greater detail these social groups and their social contexts in order to illustrate the nature of the public discourse created by the newspaper columns.

The Social Context: Augustana Camrose and Conservative Alberta

Camrose, a small Canadian city, is situated in Central Alberta about 90 kilometers south of Edmonton amidst some of the richest farmland in the prairies. The relatively small city, which originally developed along the railroad around the turn of the 19th century, today has a population of approximately 18,000 people. The original settlers came primarily from Scandinavian countries, such as Norway and Sweden, but many also came from the United States. In December 1906, Camrose was incorporated as a town. In 1955, Camrose became a city and has continued to expand, even as the significance of the railroads waned. It now stretches along Highway 13, serving a surrounding population of approximately 140,000, and is a major stop for travelers along that road (Farley, 1947; Hambly, 1980).

As the community has grown from village to town to city, so has its need for modern communications. In 1906, Camrose opened its first newspaper, *The Camrose Mail*. This was replaced in 1908 by *The Camrose Canadian*, which is still published to this day on a weekly basis with a circulation of 14,730 readers. Camrose is currently served by two other local papers: the weekly *Camrose Booster*, established in 1952, with a circulation of 13,331 readers in 21 communities, and the small daily *Camrose Morning News*, which publishes 3,000 papers per day with delivery nightly to over 350 spots within the city and some of the surrounding rural area. Camrose also has its own local television station, Community Ten, which is primarily used for advertising and community service programming, including local church services and religious programming, and is home to two

radio stations, CAM-FM and CFCW, the latter of which has the proud distinction of being Canada's first full-time country music station (Dulmage, 2013). With the advent of the Big Valley Jamboree country music festival, an increase in commercial building and development, and the establishment of a resort casino, Camrose has become even more oriented toward tourism and hospitality, consequently leading to the expansion of the city's accommodation market. In addition, Camrose has become a retirement destination for the many surrounding rural communities, with seniors now comprising 20% of the population (City of Camrose, 2011). The city has an active promotional campaign to attract seniors, describing the city as a "senior friendly community."

What draws many to Camrose is perhaps its rurban nature, a combination of positive rural and urban qualities (Pahl, 1968; Bonner, 1997). In promotional material from the office of the economic development coordinator, Camrose is presented in the following way: "We're the perfect size to enjoy all of the educational, recreational and entertainment facilities of a thriving city, yet we remain small enough to appreciate the convenience and security of a rural way of life" (Telford, 2012, p. 2). In another brochure, Camrose is presented as "an oasis with all the amenities" and "a healthy alternative to other cities in the province that are feeling the strain of massive growth" (Kryzanowski, n.d.). While Camrose is an example of a rurban environment that attracts a diverse range of citizens, its political context is distinctively homogeneous. Camrose is located in the heart of rural Alberta and its citizens share many of the unique political views and social values held by the people of the province. What comes to mind when one thinks of Alberta? Certain "Wild West" stereotypes take shape: cowboys, farmers, and evangelical preachers, and perhaps we can add another more recent, more industrial stereotype, that of the oil rigger. These stereotypical characters lend support to the popular view of Alberta as being rugged, conservative, Christian, and redneck (van Herk, 2001; Holt, 2009). But to what extent are these stereotypes reflected in a unique Albertan political culture?

Political culture refers to "deeply-rooted, popularly-held beliefs, values, and attitudes about politics," (Wiseman 1996, p. 21). The political culture of Alberta is unique from the rest of English-speaking Canada as it is, and always has been, based on socially and fiscally conservative views. Albertans and their government have

traditionally supported free market initiatives such as lower taxes and fewer regulations on business (Fraser Institute, 2002; Norrie, Owram, & Emery, 2002; Wallace, 2002) and opposed progressive reforms such as changes to the definition of marriage to include same-sex marriage (Rayside, 2008; Lloyd & Bonnett, 2005; Banack, 2012).

In federal elections, Conservative candidates generally receive an overwhelming majority of the vote in their electoral districts, or ridings as they are known in Canada. Rural Alberta is clearly Canada's most conservative region, and has been for the better part of the past 80 years. Most elections have seen the right-wing party of the day win all or most of the ridings in Alberta, often by massive margins. This region was the birthplace of the populist Reform Party in 1989 and the base of support for the Reform and Canadian Alliance parties from 1993 to 2000 and the former Progressive Conservative Party before them (Laird, 1998). The former Conservative Party of Canada had retained massive support in Alberta for advancing neo-liberal, conservative politics, winning virtually every riding in this region by some of the largest margins in the nation (Parliament of Canada, n.d.). While the Conservatives lost the 2015 election, they continued to receive overwhelming support from their constituents in Alberta. The hegemonic status of conservative politics in Alberta makes rural Alberta easily the least competitive region in the country and results in little public debate on major issues. When ideological issues are debated, such as health care and same-sex marriage, Albertans tend to take a hard conservative stance. Often, they represent a brash voice in the Canadian political system, speaking out against liberal social and fiscal values. Much of the political culture of Alberta hinges on the idea that Ottawa is an enemy of the province (Archer, 1992; Wesley, 2011). The peak of this sentiment emerged during the National Energy Program in 1980, in which the Federal Government sought to nationalize energy prices and increase taxation of oil and natural gas. This program was seen as a direct attack on Alberta's oil and gas industry and autonomy. The program led to public and political outcry best symbolized by the bumper stickers stating "Let the Eastern bastards freeze in the dark." Another example of the so-called "Alberta divide" appeared in 2001, when six prominent Albertans (including Stephen Harper prior to becoming Prime Minister) penned the "Alberta Agenda," which asked Alberta Premier Ralph Klein to protect the material and human resources of Alberta from the then Liberal

Government in Ottawa and develop provincial institutions similar to Quebec, such as a provincially run pension plan and police force (Harper, Flanagan, Morton, T., Knopff, Crooks, & Boessenkool, 2001). This was in order to restrict the influence that the federal government had in Alberta. By controlling these matters in the province, Alberta would give less control of the province to the federal government.

As such, provincial political leaders have represented a feeling in Alberta of fighting the oppressors. When Albertans find a leader that defends them against Ottawa, and represents their socially conservative interests, they stand by them. Alberta's tendency to view Ottawa as an enemy has resulted in a quasi-single party governance. This caused an attitudinal shift in voters toward provincial elections. Instead of voting for an official opposition in the provincial legislature, Albertans tended to vote overwhelmingly for socially and fiscally conservative parties because they viewed the federal government as the opposition to Alberta as a province (Wesley, 2011). In a major deviation from past elections, the left of center NDP party was victorious in the recent 2015 provincial election. Historically, when Albertans have changed governments it has been a rejection of a long standing conservative party for another conservative party. Only time will tell if the recent drastic change in provincial governance reflects a significant change in social, economic, and political values.

Despite the political move to the left in the recent provincial election, Albertans continue to support their conservative values at the federal level. Nowhere is this more the case than in the federal riding of Crowfoot, within which Camrose is located. Within the heart of rural Alberta, the riding of Crowfoot is one of Canada's largest geographical ridings and Camrose is one of the biggest municipalities within it. In times of economic booms and even recessions, the Conservative support in Crowfoot has been resolute. Since its inception in 1966, the Crowfoot riding has elected Progressive Conservative, Reform, Canadian Alliance and Conservative MPs, all by wide margins, in many cases garnering over 80 percent of the vote (McLean, 2005).

Alberta conservatism is often associated with religion. However, according to the 2001 census, Alberta is second to only British Columbia among all Canadian Provinces with respect to the percentage of citizens who declared they had no religious affiliation whatsoever (Statistics Canada, n.d.). Moreover, only British Columbia and Quebec

contained a smaller percentage of citizens who regularly attended religious services at least once a month than Alberta, although there are pockets of high attendance in Alberta (Clark, 2003) such as Camrose. Not surprisingly, the 2001 census distinguished Camrose as a conservative and largely religious community with 85% of residents identifying as Christian, while 14% had no religious affiliation. In addition, to its 23 churches, Camrose hosts the Canadian Lutheran Bible Institute, a local monthly Christian paper, "Crosswalk," and a Christian bookstore. With a significant religious presence, Camrose is considered to occupy the northern portion of the contentiously labeled "Bible Belt" which is assumed to run south to Drumheller (home of the Big Valley Creation Science Museum) and Lethbridge (home of Miracle Channel, the first over-the-air religious TV station in Canada).

What makes Camrose unique among other similarly sized prairie communities is the presence of a post-secondary education institution. Augustana Campus was for the first 75 years known as Camrose Lutheran College (CLC) and the founders of CLC were primarily interested in preserving Norwegian language and culture and in strengthening Christian belief (Johansen, n.d.). This emphasis on strengthening Christian belief meant that for many years the college was theologically conservative. Full degree-granting status was attained in 1984 and the college became a university college in 1985, when its first B.A. degrees were granted. The college changed its name to Augustana University College in 1991 in order to attract a more diverse student body. In 2004, faced with financial pressures, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) agreed to conveyance and the college merged with the University of Alberta to become a separate faculty and satellite campus of the university, now known as the Augustana Campus of the University of Alberta.

In 1991, Augustana University College founded the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research in the Liberal Arts (CIRLA) based on the liberal arts belief that university education is best typified as a dialogue between itself and other groups in society and, also, within its own walls. From an interdisciplinary perspective, CIRLA aimed to address the place of the university in society, the usefulness of university education, and the tension between differing views of the university. In order to meet its mandate, CIRLA supported the publication of *Dianoia: A Liberal Arts Interdisciplinary Journal*, sponsored a number of international

conferences, and maintained a yearly colloquium series. Finally, in 1996, CIRLA faculty initiated a weekly column in the local, and independently owned, *Camrose Canadian* newspaper entitled, “Educated Guesses.” Interestingly, this coincided with a broader “upswing in interest in public intellectuals in English Canada” in the late 1990s (McLaughlin and Townsley 2011, 345). While not specifically mentioned in the inaugural column, one of the primary goals of the column, in the words of one of the more conservative authors, was to “break down the wall of suspicion between Augustana and the wider Camrose community. My own political sympathies are probably closer to those of Camrosians than to those of my colleagues, so I was probably more comfortable than other colleagues in writing to the Camrose readership. I thought that this might help build the bridge” (personal interview 1).

Despite its rocky reception, the column continued unabated for six years, generating what can best be described as a moderate interest from the Camrose public. According to another initiator of the column, “there was very little response to the columns, either in the letters to the editor of the paper or in letters directly to an author of a column. I would occasionally hear from someone that they had read a column, but usually there was silence. I did wonder sometimes whether anyone was reading them” (personal interview 2). In 2002, the *Camrose Canadian* was taken over by Sun Media, a Quebecor company, which regarded the “Educated Guesses” column as a waste of important advertising space and dropped it accordingly (personal interview 1).

Fortunately, the other weekly paper in town, the *Camrose Booster*, independently owned and operated, decided to adopt the column under the new name “Second Thought.” The paper was launched by Bill and Berdie Fowler in 1952. An alumna of Camrose Lutheran College and a recipient of an honorary doctor of laws degree from the University of Alberta, Berdie Fowler wanted the column because for her “it adds a unique dimension to the editorial content of our paper” (personal correspondence, September 3, 2004). In her opinion, the column “stimulates thought, and also helps to strengthen the Augustana-community partnership” (personal correspondence, December 15, 2005). During the column’s run in the *Booster*, Fowler remained an enthusiastic supporter of the column, seeing its full potential. For her:

...a column from Augustana helps to connect the institution with the community and serves to strengthen the partnership aspect

of the relationship.... They are usually timely and always thought-provoking, encouraging the reader to think again.... It, hopefully, helps to diminish the prevalence of tunnel vision on which too many important decisions tend to be based (personal correspondence, May 29, 2004).

And so the column survived and continues to be published to this day, although now on a fortnightly basis.

Between 1996 and 2013, a total of 377 columns were written which generated 142 letters to the editor. While contributors from a number of disciplines write on a wide range of topics, such as same-sex marriage, drug policy, evolution, euthanasia, music, religion, and sports, the vast majority of columns have been devoted to national and international politics. In the minds of many contributors, the column is a tiny voice from a bastion of progressivism that struggles to be heard in the heart of conservative Alberta (survey results). The column continues because of the willingness of the *Camrose Booster* to devote space to a discussion that underscores the importance of cooperation between town and gown. The column also survives because of the willingness of the faculty to take time from their teaching, research, and service commitments to write columns. But some interesting questions need to be asked. Why do the faculty continue to write? What motivates them and what impact do they think the column actually has on the reading public?

Professing Publicly: Why Professors Write Columns

Generally, evidence from the survey and interviews suggests that for most faculty the column is seen as a way to “give a public face to the institution” and “promote positive town-gown relations” (survey respondent). Most faculty members think that the column is valuable in that it “provides an academic angle on issues otherwise absent in the local papers” (survey respondent). In particular, many respondents thought that the column “challenges the conservative bias” that they felt is held by most of its readers and the area in general (survey respondent).

Out of the respondents, 59% had written for the “Second Thought” or “Educated Guesses” columns, with 31.7% having written from two to five columns, and 4.9% having written over five columns. This corresponds with the historical analysis of the columns, which found that between one-third and one-half of faculty at a given time have contributed a column and suggests a widespread commitment to

the column among faculty. Given the nature of the modern university, with its emphasis on research, why would professors devote valuable time away from their research, teaching, and service commitments?

The main reason for not writing columns, not surprisingly, is lack of time, followed closely by a feeling that their areas of research interest would not be suitable for a column or of general public interest. Other reasons included being new to Augustana and the community, a preference for engaging in the community in other ways, and finally, a simple lack of desire to contribute in this particular way. The main reason that faculty gave for writing columns was that they had something to say that they thought was interesting and relevant to current events. As one participant stated, “I wanted to say something to the Camrose and area population about a topic that I thought was important. I was under no illusion that this would reach, or even convince, everybody, but I wanted to share my opinion and interpretations of those topics” (personal interview 10). This was echoed by another participant: “My motivation...is to educate or enlighten the readers about research or share a differing interpretation of public events that is informed by my scholarly pursuits.... In essence, I’m trying to get members of the public to think more critically about events that are occurring in the world around them” (personal interview 9). Others mentioned that they wrote the column after being encouraged to do so by the editors or other colleagues. What is most interesting, however, is that most participants believed that academics, as public intellectuals, have a significant responsibility to engage in issues of societal importance and that the column was one accessible and meaningful way of doing so. In terms of what motivates this sense of responsibility, three themes were identified by the participants: the importance of giving back to the public, being a leader and expert, and breaching the ivory tower and improving town-gown relations.

Community Service: Giving Back to the Public

Some participants saw themselves as public servants because their extensive education and current teaching and research are publicly funded. As such, 95% of survey respondents agreed that they have a responsibility to share their knowledge and expertise with the public. These sentiments are clearly expressed by one participant who wrote, “We have one the best jobs in the world and given that a great deal of public money went into our education, writing columns is a way to give back to

society” (survey respondent). Similarly, for another, “Academics are citizens, who may have particularly valuable expertise, and should be as active as possible in their communities and society at large. I think the fact of public funding puts an added onus on publicly-funded academics to be publicly engaged” (survey respondent).

This feeling was reiterated in the interviews. For example, one participant stated:

I think that it is important that scholars share their understanding of our world with our fellow citizens. As academics, we have been given the privilege to deeply reflect on and investigate our world. But along with that privilege comes the responsibility to share our knowledge with our fellow citizens (personal interview 13).

For another participant, in addition to the economic obligation the fact that academics have the luxury of spending their lives “attempting to understand the world around them,” means that academics are “obliged to serve the best interests of society” and “have a moral obligation to share our insights and knowledge” (personal interview 6). Similarly, another participant was “frustrated at the narrow arenas of academic discourse” and thought that “The ‘Second Thought’ columns offer a way of fulfilling our responsibilities as public intellectuals...connecting with the communities they serve” (personal interview 3). One participant saw it as their duty to engage the public: “Another purpose is to fulfill our duties as academics in offering opinions on critical issues of our day” (personal interview 10). The particular culture of Camrose seemed to add to the obligation one participant felt: “In our circumstances in this community, we have enormous responsibility for this type of public engagement. If not us, who? Certainly not the politicians who as previously noted are anti-engagement” (personal interview 11).

Leaders and Experts

In addition to giving back to the community, 71% of survey respondents indicated that writing columns was connected to being “educated and enlightened” or having a certain degree of “expertise” on a topic and occupying a “leadership” position in society (survey respondent). As one participant explained, public intellectuals:

...attempt to intervene in public debates or create them, beyond the already public

debates proper to their occupation or discipline, so as to bring their expertise and/or their opinion to the service of society and to have an influence either on political decisions or on their society's culture. Academics have responsibility to raise important issues, offer informed opinions, put current events into context, and to ensure important ideas, concerns, and interpretations are not forgotten (personal interview 7).

This notion of responsibility was shared by another participant: "We have a responsibility to use our education, knowledge and skills for the betterment of society. These columns are one way that professors can reach out to the public and provide leadership" (survey respondent). Thinking of students, another participant saw the columns as "an opportunity to model community engagement to our students, especially those engaging, or thinking of engaging, in community service learning" (personal interview 14).

For another, the fact that the campus was located in a small rural community was an added consideration: "I believe that academics have a large responsibility, especially in a small community that features a university campus, for publicly engaging in social issues. We have access to research, data, and students that allow us to reveal, discuss and inform" (survey respondent). For another participant, an academic's work and teaching are supposed to "have a bearing on society outside the campus." As this participant elaborated, this was particularly the case:

...when our species is under threat from global warming and overpopulation and environmental degradation, it would be irresponsible of us to act as though all that mattered is what goes on, on campus, or for us to divorce campus life and thinking from the rest of society. Our students should leave campus understanding the major issues in our society, having strategies to deal with them and make changes, and we can model that through community engagement (personal interview 4).

Others recognized the importance of reaching out to a public not necessarily familiar with academic journals: "We have a great responsibility. Most people don't read academic journals, so this is an important way to engage with people"

(survey respondent). Another believed that in addition to informing people, it was necessary to "clarify issues and ask questions differently" and "intervene specifically in our domain of specialization so as to allow members of the community to freely form their opinion" (survey respondent). Another participant elaborated:

It is incumbent on us to apply our scholarly knowledge to the current issues facing us today in a manner that is accessible to all. Academic journals are an excellent forum for peers, but the jargon we use to quickly share ideas amongst ourselves must be interpreted in a public forum for those not at the forefront of the research" (personal interview 13).

Some participants argued that not all the disciplines had the same opportunity to engage the public. As one put it, "It is very important for academics to contribute informed opinion in public contexts, but not all disciplines have an equal contribution to make, since some disciplines have more to say about socially important issues than others" (survey respondent). For another, it was important to remain objective and avoid trying to persuade people what to believe or not believe:

We have to be careful not to abuse our position on ethical issues. For many issues, the sides are defined by ethical perspectives, which can neither be proven correct or incorrect. Where we can play a role is informing the public about scientific knowledge, the public then needs to use that information in its own decision-making. It is not for us to tell people what they should or should not believe. This is especially important for debates/issues along religious and political ideology lines (survey respondent).

These sentiments were echoed by another participant, who thought that while it is important to "embrace the concept of the public intellectual," there is a need to do so mindfully "as educators rather than as missionaries," which "requires humility and honest respect of where people are coming from" (personal interview 3). However, another participant addressed the issue of representing minorities:

I especially find it important to represent minority views, as the local papers, even in their locally produced editorial content but especially in syndicated content, tend to present opinions that reflect the local “common sense.” In doing so, I hope I can help those whose view is more often in the minority to formulate their own views, and that they can feel represented (personal interview 7).

Bridges, Towers, and Town-Gown Relations

Finally, in addition to giving back to the community by putting their academic expertise to public use, 97% of professors surveyed were motivated to write columns in an attempt to “avoid town-gown divisions” and “dispel ivory-tower stereotypes.” As one participant explained:

Academics are often paradoxically considered both leaders in their field and community at the same time as living within ivory towers. We need to shed the latter image and be active and engaged within our community (survey response).

For one of the original editors, the column was an important and much needed bridge between the community and the university. As he put it:

I noticed on arrival in Camrose...a real tension between Camrosians and Augustana types. It started for me with the realtor who linked us to the house we bought. He complained that the professors made a bundle of money and implied that they were aloof. This from a guy who got my business! There were notable exceptions but this was the general sense I got. When I coached and played hockey and soccer, thereby schmoozing with the “hoi-polloi,” I discovered that conversations often went silent when I answered questions about where I worked (personal interview 1).

Similarly, another participant wrote:

I believe “Second Thought” allows us to build and maintain bridges and contacts between the campus and the broader community, especially as professors and students tend to remain isolated from other [citizens]. It forces professors to

think about the community and about their involvement in the community; it reminds the community that there are people among them who devote their life to study, and that many of their concerns have to do with questions of social importance (personal interview 7).

Another participant thought that while the university had been doing a better job at showing how it contributed to the community, they still felt very much like “the other” within Camrose. As the participant further explained:

...I often feel that I am looked at or treated differently when people know who I am and what I do. For example, when talking to other parents (generally moms), or volunteering for the pre-school or at a play group, I try to not hide, but not reveal, my job as I feel it creates a divide and makes people uncomfortable around me. When they find out, people say things like “Oh, I’ll have to watch what I say now” or it just kills conversation generally. I also think that many people see us as elitist or intellectual, which is not a good thing in rural Alberta (personal interview 6).

Indeed, for another faculty member, to expect some form of intellectual dialogue in Camrose was unrealistic. As they saw it:

The university is, and always will be, perceived as “the other” and quite marginal to the interests of the town fathers and those interests are largely economic. Inasmuch as the university has a huge economic impact on the community, the town will always have a polite toleration of the university, but beyond that it will always be perceived with a sense of indifference to postsecondary education. Why would you need to spend money on higher education when the farm and the oil fields make you money so much faster (survey respondent).

As such, it is not surprising that another participant argued that professors at Augustana should choose their publics since there “are more publics beyond Camrose that are much more worthwhile engaging; they are more open to thoughtfulness on

issues” (survey response). Similarly, for another the column should ideally break the two solitudes of town and gown, but

I sometimes wondered if it did the opposite. The most “engaging” were those that aroused the most negative response, most hostile anti-intellectualism, or most dismissive anti-Augustana sentiment. I am not sure whether or not dialogue was achieved. Of course, one cannot know what impact the columns may have had outside the letters to the editor. Nevertheless, there is a case to be made that articles that elicited the most negative response were the most successful, for anything that disturbs the comfortable and self-reinforcing surface of a community can be productive, especially for those living beneath the surface of the community (personal interview 3).

Clearly, tensions exist between Augustana and Camrose, as they do between most universities and the communities they inhabit, and so reducing these tensions is seen as one of the reasons why Augustana professors are motivated to write the columns. As one participant explained:

Ideally, I think the column serves as a connection between campus and the wider community, allowing us to share our knowledge and research with the general public. In practice, I am not so sure that is really how it works. I think that sometimes the column serves to widen the divide between campus and the town by demonstrating the more liberal/left-wing biases of faculty, which are not well represented in the general population—especially on issues of social change or values. That divide is apparent, such as [on] women’s issues, gay rights, even economics. At the same time, the column still serves as a way to expose people in the town to a different perspective on issues, whether the reader is receptive or not (personal interview 6).

Some of the participants acknowledged that university professors had multiple roles in the community that helped reduce tensions. As one participant explained:

Since many communities know Augustana faculty in many roles (coaching, volunteers, committee, and board members), I think those view Augustana faculty as real people who are contributing to the community and therefore the relationship is positive. On the other hand, if that kind of relationship has not been experienced, I would say that Augustana faculty are seen as intellectuals that study inconsequential topics and teach students “liberal” ideas that are not helpful in our economy. I expect that there is a continuum between these two possibilities (personal interview 11).

Similarly, for another participant:

Lots of Augustana faculty are themselves members of the community and make reputations for themselves as people and professors in multi-dimensional ways: as good teachers, as skilled volunteers, as parents and neighbors. While community people—and staff for that matter—don’t necessarily know what range of things professors do, and why, I do think that there is less inclination on Main Street than there was when I came to see faculty as uninterested in Camrose (personal interview 12).

For others, there was a danger of being negatively perceived when writing columns for public consumption. For example, when asked about how professors are perceived by the Camrose community, one participant replied:

Tree-hugging, gay-loving, impractical eggheads. This is an exaggeration of course. Others respect us. I think if there were more columns by people explaining what they do, what their research is about, and why they do it, why it’s interesting and important, that would help the community know us better. And maybe it would help the researchers/teachers themselves (personal interview 8).

This is often easier said than done. As one participant put it, “The challenge is to write in a manner that is not intimidating to the general public so they see the column as a learning opportunity without being intimidated” (survey response). Similarly, another participant argued:

...if articles are not well written, or are written too obscurely, it makes the faculty look bad and confirms the opinions of those who think we are communists in ivory towers with no practical knowledge of the real world. So the articles need to be good (thoughtful, logical, geared to the audience), or we risk alienating readers who are also our community members and potential students, [their] parents, and donors (personal interview 4).

Despite the perceived difficulty involved in writing public-friendly articles that was held by some participants, most saw the column as an important vehicle for community engagement. As one participant argued:

I think this public engagement is vital and necessary.... Unfortunately, it's something that academics don't always do a good job of addressing and seems to be prioritized lower than our teaching and research obligations (survey response).

Concluding Remarks

The primary responsibility of the university professor is to further the particular mission of the university. This responsibility typically consists of teaching undergraduate and graduate students, engaging in research and creative work, and providing service to their institution. Academics at Augustana who write columns in the local papers do so largely out of a sense of another responsibility, one that consists of providing knowledge and insight, leadership and service, and breaking down barriers of intellectual elitism to a public that contributes financially to their chosen vocation. In a broader sense, they are contributing to democratic life by sharing knowledge and, ideally, creating a public space for a safe and civil discussion of the most contentious public issues. As Fallis (2008) argues: "Society finances the research at universities and, therefore, the university, with its enormous privileges, has an obligation to make this knowledge as accessible as possible, to disseminate it as a public intellectual" (p. 22). This idea is shared by Stein (2007), who argues that in addition to helping students become good citizens, universities have "a broader obligation to the public: to share knowledge, explore issues and create safe space for debate and discussion of public issues" (p. 7). Exploring issues often requires academics, particularly those in the social sciences and humanities, to engage in

social criticism and foster public debate and discourse on important political and social issues.

Augustana professors have certainly embraced the role of the public intellectual, as identified by the authors previously mentioned, be it only on a local community scale. The columns have been appearing in the local newspapers for 19 years and while most columns do not elicit a response from the community, from time to time some do. Occasionally, those columns that coincide with important and significant social and political issues, such as same-sex marriage, resonate with the public and contribute to public discourse. The debates can be negative when comments from the community turn personal and perhaps town-gown relations suffer when professors seem to confirm stereotypes, but for the most part the debates are positive for the community as they provide alternative perspectives and a safe arena for public discussion and the sharing of ideas. As Berdie Fowler commented:

I hope the column serves to strengthen the town-gown relationship, not put it at risk. If thought-provoking columns lead to respectful dialogue, that is a healthy thing. Sadly, the recent gay/lesbian/sexuality issue has, in some cases, brought forth letters that are less than respectful of differing opinions. Nevertheless, within limits of course, we know that peoples who have freedoms to speak their minds live more peacefully than those whose views are suppressed (personal correspondence, April 7, 2005).

The columns demonstrate to the public the type of thinking and work that goes on in universities and the relevance they have for modern democratic societies. The debates that the columns foster allow Augustana professors to contribute in some small fashion to the public sphere and democracy. Engaging the public can be difficult given the limited amount of time at the disposal of the professor. Teaching, research and service commitments, as well as basic family obligations, do not leave much time for other activities. Indeed, for many academics caught up in grant writing and the publish-or-perish philosophy of academia, writing for the public is taboo—a waste of precious time. This is why Barnet (2005), among others, argues that the role of the public intellectual should be more rigorously established in modern academic life, which requires rethinking what it means to be an academic, and accepting public

responsibilities beyond the university. This is very much a central theme in Burawoy's call for a "public sociology" where there is a greater engagement by sociologists with civil society in the development of research that is more accessible, relevant, and useful to non-academic audiences (Burawoy, 2005).

In times of economic downturn, dominated by neoliberalism, universities are increasingly under attack and are being held more accountable (Côté & Allahar, 2011). It could be argued that now, more than ever, academics need to be more visible, more vocal, and demonstrate to the public the value of higher education and the relevance of the critical thought it fosters. As Graydon (2011), argues, academics engaging the public through the media and sharing their "research-gleaned insights and analysis" may go a long way in combating the popular view of professors as being "lazy, overpaid irrelevancies who sip sherry, neglect students, and have no right to complain about an four-month holiday" (p. 13–14). Moreover, such public engagement can have a genuine impact. As Hacker (2010) asserts, "the best public intellectuals ground their advocacy in true expertise" and "take carefully derived, sometimes highly technical research findings and translate them into insights that can guide public policy and public discussion" (p. 657). Indeed, given the current anti-intellectual anti-evidence stance of recent governments in Canada, now is not the time for academics to be shying away from public engagement and social and political criticism. Academics have a responsibility to conduct research, demonstrate to the public the relevance of research for public policy and to criticize irresponsible or harmful government policy that ignores the evidence provided by research. This responsibility can be realized through teaching, but also more broadly through professing in the media, whether it is international, national, or local in scope.

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About the Authors

Geraint Osborne and Shauna Wilton are associate professors at the University of Alberta, Augustana Campus.