GLOBAL: Build bridges between academia and media

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19 June 2011
Issue: 176

Universities and the media should be natural allies, given similarities in their social mandates, and there are many examples of how fruitful partnerships between them have enriched public discourse, Adam Habib, Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University of Johannesburg, said in Toronto last week. But for both sectors to be globally responsive they need to be aware of global inequalities and voice the concerns and interests of the marginalised.

The relationship between academia and the media has not been sufficiently deliberated upon, "but it needs to be, not only because it would enable the full realisation of the mandate of both sectors, but also because it is necessary for the realisation of inclusive development".

Speaking at the Worldviews Conference on Media and Higher Education, held in Toronto from 16-18 June, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research, Innovation and Advancement at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) described himself as a political scientist, a researcher of democratisation and development and "an engaged academic with a desire not only to understand but also to change the world. He is a high-profile commentator in South Africa.

Habib said universities and the media were heterogeneous sectors with overlapping functions including promoting societal values and enriching public discourse and a critical citizenry. The similarity in their core social functions "suggests that they should be natural allies and partners, even if this partnership will at times be strained".

The relationship between academia and the media took four distinct forms, Habib argued.

First, universities were the subject of reporting and investigation by the media, which was sometimes not appreciated by university executives. But universities received enormous public funding and it was "absolutely legitimate and necessary for the media to monitor the use of these resources and to hold the university accountable" as well as to ensure universities delivered on their public mandate of teaching, research and community engagement.

Second, the media was a 'service provider' through which universities enhanced their profiles through branding and marketing. While many academics were sceptical, effective marketing and branding could advance the core scholarly and academic mandate of institutions.

Third, universities could partner with sections of the media to enhance public discourse, translate their research for the public and enable both the university and the media partner to deliver on elements of their core mandates.

The fourth form was the media as an agent of advocacy on behalf of universities. Many of the university-focused media not only report on developments in higher education but also help to legitimise the case of greater investment in universities.

But it was questionable whether this advocacy for the sector was equitably undertaken, and representative of the interests of universities in both the developed and developing worlds.

Habib wondered whether in reporting on transnational partnerships, the higher education media sufficiently considered how unequal such partnerships could be and the consequences for the sector.

He gave an example of a visit to UJ by a prominent American university, part of a "flood of such approaches as public funding became available in the US for fostering partnerships with African universities". The US university had unilaterally identified themes for collaboration: African dance and culture, and quantitative research methodologies for the social sciences.

UJ said it was willing to collaborate in those fields but also wanted to explore a partnership on renewable energy where it had developed a significant footprint. "We got a polite rebuff and were told that their faculty needed to approve the thematic area - this with no sense of irony - as if our faculty should not have been accorded the same right."

The university declined the collaboration. "But our ability to do so emanated from our independent access to resources and the leverage it provided us. How many other universities in Africa, or the developing world for that matter, have this privilege?"

The question, said Habib, was whether the ownership patterns and spatial location of the university-focused media undermined their ability to comprehensively fulfill their social function. This was of concern "because there are major issues on the international front that compromise the ability of universities to fully implement their mandate".

Another issue was the responsiveness of research questions in the global academy to the concerns of the developing world.

An example was research on renewable energy, which had a major focus on solar panels, wind turbines, biofuels and so on - important breakthroughs, but unfeasible for resource-starved and energy deficient Africa, 80% of whose citizens do not have access to energy.

"Appropriately designed renewable energy solutions for the continent and other parts of the developing world have to therefore look at both cost and energy access. Yet this is not receiving sufficient attention in global renewable energy research," said Habib.

Yet another issue was traditional indicators of academic productivity and international university rankings and their applicability across the world. "There is some critical discussion of this in the media, but is this media sufficiently aware of how international university rankings can subvert national development goals in the developing world?"

Also, academic book production was declining in many parts of the developing world, Habib continued. "This in part is a product of the measures of academic productivity which prioritise journals, and inequalities in the global academy which prompt academics in the South to seek publishing opportunities in the US and UK.

"The consequence of this for national academies is serious, particularly for the social science and humanities communities."

The annual costs of journals have been increasing "way above the global inflation rate, seriously compromising the academic project in many parts of the world. The result has been the development of a global challenge both in the open access movement and the reaction by national governments to aggressively negotiate with the commercial academic publishing industry as is the case in Brazil, Pakistan and Chile.

"But how legitimate is it for academic journals to be housed under a commercial banner, and should it not be challenged? If it is to be commercially housed, should there not be rules stewarding the industry towards the broader public good, similar to those imposed on the pharmaceutical industry when it comes to the provision of life-saving drugs?"

The higher education media should investigate and critically reflect on such matters, and challenge hidden assumptions if it is to fulfill its social function and serve as a mirror to political and academic elites.

"In a sense this media needs to go beyond the spatial context that informs them, and highlight the consequences of an unequal world, its hypocrisies and contradictions and the implications of all of this for the delivery of sound teaching and learning and cutting edge research across the globe," Habib said.

Media instruments needed to be established in the developing world, to enable the plurality of expressions and reflections needed for a more equal global conversation. Both the media and higher education needed to be aware of inequalities, and to articulate the concerns of those located in marginalised contexts.

"This is important not only for moral reasons, but also for strategic ones. Our world is fast integrating, and our concerns are increasingly global rather than national, and as a result they are never going to be comprehensively addressed unless a more equal conversation emerges," Habib concluded.

"There can be no two sectors better positioned to do this than the academy and the media, and there is no better way to undertake this task than in partnership and alliance with each other."