

The new opinion makers

July 4 2011, by Andrew Jaspan

(PhysOrg.com) -- Shorter deadlines and fewer staff are pushing traditional news outlets to publish increasingly superficial stories. Andrew Jaspan, Editor of the new media channel The Conversation, explains how academia is filling the void and providing the public with context and understanding about the issues affecting us all.

The media is in a state of crisis. Declining revenues are dragging down the quality and integrity of content on our TV, on radio and in newspapers. They're vital for an informed democracy, but as jobs in newsrooms are cut, coverage is increasingly superficial and reliant on wire copy, press releases and celebrity gossip. The vacuum in the public debate is stark; people are hungry for information they can trust.

Journalists are very good at locating and highlighting problems. Yet they fall down when it comes to producing solutions. And rightly so; that isn't their primary role.

The journalist is usually a jack-of-all-trades and master of none. He or she needs to be adaptable, ready to be sent to any story and come back with the basic facts. For deeper analysis and the development of ideas that can take matters forward, experts are required.

Where do we find them? In universities and research institutes. Here are the people with the knowledge, and crucially, the inclination and ability to look forward and develop proposals and solutions. Here lie the answers to society's most complex problems.

As public servants, academics have a duty to transfer knowledge and use their expertise to improve public policy and debate. It's all very well working for years on a crucial medical breakthrough, or crunching the numbers to find out how big the Australian population can be before we reach breaking point, but if no-one (bar a few academic colleagues) reads about the research, that vital contribution is lost.

For too long the academic and media worlds have been at odds. Journalists are increasingly forced to be superficial and keen to put a sexy headline on their story to drive circulation and hits, while academics can spend years in their ivory tower drowning under a sea of books, disconnected from the real world.

Those clichés should be long gone; the two worlds have collided. Just as the media is pushing the boundaries of technology and bringing news from parts of the world that simply couldn't be reached before, academics are increasingly engaging with the commercial world, policy makers and the public.

There are more opportunities now for academics to influence public debate. Television and [radio](#) stations are multiplying while the internet is ideal for people to disseminate and engage with information.

But people don't want just any old information. In fact, most report feeling overwhelmed by the amount of information available to them. The public want timely facts delivered in a fashion they can absorb and most of all, especially in an era of Photoshop and blogging, information that they can trust. This is the holy grail of the new 'over-information age'.

We need the deeply informed knowledge gathered and nurtured by people of strong expertise in their given field. The key is to make it easier not only for those academic experts to pass on their knowledge,

but for the interested wider public to access it.

That's why we launched The Conversation. We believe the higher education sector's contribution to public debate is vital. And forward-thinking universities like UTS, which is a founding partner of The Conversation, are committed to improving the public debate.

Yet sometimes universities and individual academics need help to communicate the often-dazzling work they do. There is so much valuable work going on within the walls of these institutions that even the best-resourced public relations department could only hope to scratch the surface. We want to work with them to help get that essential information out to the public.

Our professional journalists and editors work alongside the academic authors to help them translate their in-depth knowledge to the public, because just as journalists shouldn't be doing the job of experts, it's not the role of the academic to do the job of the professional media editor.

Since we launched in March, we've been overwhelmed by the positive feedback from the academic community as well as those informed members of the public who feel they've been abandoned by the traditional [media](#).

People are interested in research and the findings, but they are also interested in the expertise those researchers have. As 'subject-matter specialists', academics are also, with our help, able to respond quickly and with real knowledge on live news. So when a major world event takes place – like the killing of Osama bin Laden – the public naturally want to know what happened, and more importantly what it means, from somebody who knows what they're talking about.

Academics are all too often shy about their work. Some think their

research isn't worthy of a spot on the news, some worry promoting their research as egotistical and others are, rightly, simply too busy. With the pressure of grant applications, teaching, administration and bureaucracy weighing down, I can't blame them.

But academics can make a difference. They can change the course of public debate by providing the proper context and understanding to a subject.

To academics we say: whenever you hear a politician making an ill-informed remark, jump on it. When you see a product promising to change someone's life, when all it's going to do is relieve them of their hard-earned cash, act on it. Use your skills and expertise to fill that gap between the public and the decision makers. Your research can make a real impact for the good of the community.

Provided by University of Technology, Sydney

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