

RICHARD CHERWITZ

# Why Become a Public Intellectual?

Reflections of a communication scholar

PERSPECTIVES

OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS, I have received numerous letters, phone calls, and emails from friends, academic colleagues, and members of the community inquiring why, having been a scholar for more than forty years, I now spend so much time writing op-eds.

**More of us must become public intellectuals to ensure that the work of the academy makes a difference in the larger world.**

This is a fair question, and I have given it a great deal of thought. First, like so many faculty, I am bothered by the current polarized and rancorous political environment,

including the uncivil discourse of our nation's leaders—which is exacerbated by the anti-intellectualism and populism that has taken hold and threatens the academic world, particularly the humanities.

So, what can I do to change this? I can vote—and do. I could also become a social activist, party official, community organizer, or political candidate. These are worthy, if not noble, pursuits but are not my calling. Instead, how can I use my unique skills and training as a faculty member to make a difference?

## Power of the pen

During my most prolific years as a researcher, I would wake up in the morning with questions and ideas that compelled me to put pen to

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RICHARD CHERWITZ is the Ernest S. Sharpe Centennial Professor in the Moody College of Communication and founder of the Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium at the University of Texas at Austin.

paper—even before finishing a cup of coffee. My best friend and department colleague once poignantly observed that professors have articles and books inside their heads crying out to be written. This also explains my urge to write op-eds.

I have spent my professional life writing academic books and journal articles in the field of rhetoric. Beginning about twenty years ago, however, I have felt increasingly obliged to use my knowledge to communicate to a larger audience outside the ivory tower—to reach ordinary citizens and members of the community with the capacity and potential to enact change.

This urge to write essays for the public at large is especially salient for me as a scholar of rhetoric, a discipline dating back to, and having roots in, the treatises of ancient Greek philosophers. Since its inception, the discipline of rhetoric has focused on the art of symbolic influence and persuasion. Thus, perhaps unlike other fields of study, rhetoric is the bridge between theory and practice. That is why, for me, it has become enormously important to write op-eds linking theories of rhetoric to the world of prudential conduct.

Rather than simply spewing partisan and visceral diatribes that would only serve to reflect the state of my political glands, I endeavor to write thoughtful commentaries grounded in an academic knowledge of rhetoric and communication. My mantra has become “I know, therefore I must write.”

Let me offer a few examples of the dozens of op-eds I have written in the past three years:

- In a February 7, 2019, essay in *Citizen Critics*, which publishes work from the academic



community and from policy experts for a broad global audience, I offered eight observations about President Donald Trump's second State of the Union address. Rather than simply communicating a partisan view, my analysis endeavored to underscore both effective and ineffective rhetorical appeals.

- In the January 2019 issue of *Communication Currents*, a publication of the National Communication Association bringing academic research to the attention of the media and public, I argued that Trump's rhetoric provides an empirical test of the social construction of reality hypothesis—a theory scholars have been debating for more than forty years.
- In a December 10, 2018, op-ed in the *Des Moines Register*, I used Aristotle's concept of the enthymeme—a rhetorical syllogism—to document how the eulogies of George H. W. Bush violated the norms of eulogizing by

providing what I labeled “shadow rhetoric.” As a result, these speeches became an implicit, but obvious, critique of Trump.

- In a September 13, 2018, *Houston Chronicle* op-ed, I drew upon research on cognitive dissonance and persuasion to explain potential methods for Americans to transcend political polarization and find ways to compromise.
- In a July 30, 2017, op-ed in the *San Antonio Express-News*, I employed the classical rhetorical theory of stasis, first developed by the Romans and now the foundation of our country's legal system of argument, to suggest that Trump shows signs of someone guilty of wrongdoing.

My process of writing an opinion essay typically begins with a social media post. In the wake of comments and suggestions, some of those thoughts evolve into extended and carefully

crafted essays. Writing is what I was trained to do and invariably is a response to a deeply felt need rather than being an assignment or job—just as was the case with scholarly writing.

### **Walking the talk**

A second and interrelated reason exists for why I write op-eds. In 1996, almost twenty years

into my tenure as a professor, and during my stint as a dean in the graduate school at the University of Texas at Austin, I created

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the Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium (IE)—an initiative empowering students to own and become accountable for their education.<sup>1</sup> Through twelve graduate-level courses delivered to more than five thousand students in nearly every academic discipline, we teach principles of citizen scholarship, which encourages students to put their knowledge to work to create change and make a difference, whether in academic or nonacademic venues.

In talking about the consortium, West Virginia University's president, E. Gordon Gee, has described it as “a reassessment and restatement of what these great land-grant universities [such as the University of Texas] are all about—about community engagement, about thinking anew and fresh about how we communicate with our citizens and how we engage them in the wider world.” The issue has become one of partnerships, says Gee, who has served as president or chancellor of five major research universities and has encountered numerous challenges to higher education. “No longer,” he says, “can these vast enterprises called universities simply be isolated, arrogant, and do things on their own.”<sup>2</sup>

In the process of promoting the IE program, I realized it was time to practice what I preached. I complained vociferously to university administrators that, if we wished to gain the respect and trust of the public, parents, and donors (the people who fund and sustain our work), then faculty must proactively document the value of what they do. This includes using their expertise to become involved in public policy and to work on solving community problems. Otherwise, outsiders with a political agenda who do not understand the goals of higher education will foist changes upon us that might destroy our academic venture. I was not suggesting that scholars give

up their research or apologize for their work; instead, I was advocating that they bring their knowledge to a wider and less insular audience.

Hence, in the intervening twenty-plus years, I have continued to write not only scholarly monographs but also essays that take my case to the public, as well as to higher education leaders across the country. This has led to positive curricular and other improvements in how education is designed and delivered at research universities. One example is Arizona State University's “New American University,” which focuses on both the education of students and the betterment of society and teaches, for instance, engineers to work with economists in a multidisciplinary approach necessary to solve real-world problems.

“Unless colleges and universities are to appear as removed from the front lines of change as the most remote monasteries of the Middle Ages, they must embrace a new entrepreneurial academic culture such as that advanced by the Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium,” including the program's concept of citizen-scholar, says Michael M. Crow, president of Arizona State University.<sup>3</sup>

More of us must become public intellectuals to ensure that the work of the academy makes a difference in the larger world. As Gee wrote to me, “We all have an obligation to speak out and speak up.”

So perhaps the question is not “Why do I write op-eds?” but rather “Why don't more faculty also write op-eds?” After all, as scholars, we are highly motivated, knowing there are important reasons for undertaking research; and as educators, we take seriously our mission to teach. Don't we have an obligation, therefore, to educate the public about the value of our research? LE

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### NOTES

1. For more information, see “Intellectual Entrepreneurship,” Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium, <http://www.ut-ie.com>.
2. See “Intellectual Entrepreneurship,” Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium.
3. See “Intellectual Entrepreneurship,” Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium.