SYMPOSIUM

Rules for Public Intellectuals

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Like many political scientists, I willingly align myself with the intellectual side of the public intellectual title, but I make no claim to having a public identity. Still, I am moved to join in the shared confessions of public intellectuals (PI) by responding to Amitai Etzioni's article, because the ten-point distillation of his trials and tribulations so strongly resonates with my own experiences. However marginal they may be, frequent media commentaries and interviews have given me enough exposure to the treacherous pathways between scholarship and the media to sufficiently understand the PI's dilemma.

While it is hardly a misnomer, the term *public intellectual* harbors its own built-in contradictions. It embodies the notion of exposing both the certified intellectual and his or her process of intellectual reflection to a broader public audience, which, by nature, is only interested in the product. The sharper the prediction, the more succinct the explanation, and the more tangible the causes and effects claimed, the larger the audience is likely to be. The thoughtful allusions, insightful background references, and the occasional vocabulary enhancements that provide evidence of the author's intellection then serve as added certification of his or her exceptional resourcefulness, if the initials following his or her name are not sufficient. The "public" label then is predetermined, not by any evidence of a popular audience, but by the preemptive labeling of the mass media.

Investigating the concept of the PI for *PS* readers, in contrast to the mass media, it initially seemed appropriate to provide a data-based methodology that, for example, would sample opinion pieces and interviews in the major media and categorize them by a range of subjects and variants in ideological interpretation. The value of such an exercise, however, would ultimately hinge on the legitimacy of the problem itself. What constitutes the concept of the PI is not simply the existence of meaningful participants in public dialogue, but also the processes by which these people come to acquire the label, maintain the status, and, eventually, if Etzioni is right, fall from its graces. That approach offers a broader kind of storytelling and criticism that leads to substantive description and precedes explanatory analysis. That is what Etzioni does with singular dexterity in telling his story in a way that leads to a useful description of the broader PI experience.

My commentary seeks to add to that description some rudimentary analysis or explanations of the characteristics he identifies in the PI story. Before doing so, however, I address another fundamental characteristic of PIs that he understandably omits. That characteristic is their participation in what may be called "structural" policy advocacy. No intellectual's intervention on the air or in print normally starts with the goal of advocating a position or outcome, but no participants are chosen or invited back by producers or editors without a policy outcome in mind. I consider this an impersonal observation, since I view myself as an analyst rather than an advocate, although I see most prominent analysts heavily engaging in predictable advocacy. The trick here is to see oneself in a purely individualistic light, free of the editorial process in which the commentary is selected. In these situations, analysts are like weapons in ongoing public policy wars who, adapting a cliché, do not themselves do the killing. Rather, it is the editors and the journals that pull the triggers by picking these analysts. Hence, the intellectual is able to preserve the semblance of objectivity.

Objectivity still seems probable when the commentary is very general, as with Etzioni's communitarian analysis. As long as he is not directly advocating communitarianism as a problem-solving approach, he could be simply describing, for example, value conflicts in tax policy, in contrast to the self-exculpating individualism of the under-taxed elite. "Communitarianism," he says,

> maintains that society should articulate what is good—that such articulations are both needed and legitimate. . . Communitarianism is often contrasted with classical liberalism, a philosophical position that holds each individual should formulate the good on his or her own. Communitarians examine the ways shared conceptions of the good (values) are formed, transmitted, justified, and enforced. (Etzioni 2003, 224)

Ironically, for some political scientists who have spent time in France, communitarianism is seen as the battle cry of race conscious or sectarian minorities against the dominant individualistic (republican) value system. Although the terms vary across continents, the essential choice between valuing or diminishing individualist constraints undergirds much policy commentary. In France, communitarianism is expressly seen as a combative, hyper-pluralistic attack on an egalitarian and ethnically undifferentiated society. Although many of the residents of its ghettoized suburbs would not agree with this perspective, the mass media virtually prohibits any challenge to its conventional wisdom by opposing intellectuals. The simple willingness to recognize race in census data is itself a politically sensitive declaration, while in the United States, racial and ethnic identification is the norm. Communitarian values only surface in ideological references to a more holistic society. Yet, any communal reference itself excludes from the conversation more Wall Street conservatives and moderates and

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more Washington liberals than right-wing or left-wing politicians, depending on their degrees of individualism.

Still, Etzioni's challenges to political and social assumptions seem to represent the most common issues that involve most political scientists in public commentary. Of course, we cannot generate a real measure of representative commentary by public intellectuals without empirical measures of what makes some commentaries fit the media parameters and others not. Although a behavior may be old, the analysis of it and the labels for it are always new or emerging. As a consequence, the uniqueness of Etzioni's contribution is that he has begun to provide meaningful categories for his anecdotal experiences that should be part of a sharper classification of experiences shared throughout the discipline. His experiences, which he turns into "lessons," also reflect very common experiences of others, along with characteristic behavioral constraints. My impression of these behavioral constraints on public intellectuals is that they form "rules" of behavior that might be turned into hypotheses, if one were industrious enough. These rules are used here to group Etzioni's lessons.

What matters in the major media today is some event-based evolution of what mattered yesterday. If reporters are on the ground in a disaster zone or a war zone, the attention of an editor is likely to remain focused there for some time, until it is jostled by another striking event. The PI invariably comes along after the striking event to offer an interpretation. If his or her comment is one of the few available that fits pre-established patterns, media attention is likely. If, however, the PI's interpretation diverges from the normal perspective or is a reinterpretation of an ongoing event, then his or her comments take an automatic back seat to those that reporters are prepared to market.

FOUR RULES AND TEN USEFUL LESSONS

RULE ONE: MEDIA EDITORS AND PRODUCERS DETERMINE THE SCOPE AND IMPACT OF THE MESSAGE

Lesson 1: The Frustrations of Speaking an Uncomfortable Truth to Power

As much as PIs may want to "speak truth to power," in Etzioni's words, they are largely propelled by the idea of speaking a truth that is different from the one currently holding the attention of power. The propelling force for this truth-speaking is some mixture of individual motivation and structural equilibrium in a typically liberal-conservative balance. As a consequence, PIs can expect to garner some attention if they are persistent, as long as they have had previous access to the same media. Patience, Etzioni's first lesson, is essential, because the PI, by the nature of his or her appeal, exhibits some contentiousness with the powers that be. Patience is also frequently rewarded, because the successful PI maintains a degree of proximity to the same powers. The idea of a community of interests or communitarian values is important in this context. The successful PI demonstrates a shared frame of reference with the decision makers under review and, more often, seeks to expose their digressions from shared values, rather than to castigate them as nonbelievers. During the last election period, in my case, it was impossible to analyze election outcomes for black candidates in the press or on the air without recounting broader ideas of racial progress, even when they were not immediately relevant.

A more pervasive frustration for PIs than value-based conflicts with decision makers is perhaps the inattentiveness of news reporting to emerging issues. What matters in the major media today is some event-based evolution of what mattered yesterday. If reporters are on the ground in a disaster zone or a war zone, the attention of an editor is likely to remain focused there for some time, until it is jostled by another striking event. The PI invariably comes along after the striking event to offer an interpretation. If his or her comment is one of the few available that fits pre-established patterns, media attention is likely. If, however, the PI's interpretation diverges from the normal perspective or is a reinterpretation of an ongoing event, then his or her comments take an automatic back seat to those that reporters are prepared to market. For example, the observation that Obama lost the white vote would have shortened any TV interview and cancelled subsequent ones for weeks after the 2008 election.

Lesson 2: Perseverance in Making the Inner Voice Public

After the decade-long ascendance of the "me generation" and the dissipated sense of social responsibility pushed by Ronald Reagan supporters, among others, media interest in Etzioni's more communally oriented perspective resurged. His persistence through the "thick and thin" of maintaining a public profile, though a factor, was less important than the inescapable factors of timing and changing socioeconomic circumstances. A change of course in political debate may have little causal relationship to intellectual contributions. Robert Bellah, whom Etzioni references in a different context, popularized the concept of "civic religion" as a factor in the stabilization of American pluralism (Bellah 1970). In the American civic religion, the ideological extensions of individualism and social responsibility are counterbalancing forces with their own pendulum potential. Pressure on the pendulum may be exerted by societal, economic, or political forces

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on which the intellectual must wait in order to penetrate mass media consciousness. Perseverance is largely valuable only because the PI is available to the media when the time is ripe and when influential people are ready to listen.

Lesson 3: Recalibrating the Conventional Wisdom

Political sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron argue in *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* that higher education systems around the world are most stable when they allow and even encourage student protests (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). The protesters eventually became better advocates of the systems that seemingly allowed them self-expression and considered their demands than of the systems that did not permit them such freedoms. Regarding intellectuals in public life, the larger mass media may play a similar role. The media invites and absorbs political critique using established guidelines. When the critique pushes beyond the normal fringe, there is no immediate reward structure or host of commentators and reporters to hawk their agreement. With enough repetition of the abnormal idea, however, this response changes, because editors find other reinforcements for it. Then, the ideas start to look familiar. Intellectual insights' greatest impact on policy brings less credit to their authors than do their more insignificant observations. A few of us in political science argued for years in the media that higher black than white voter turnout was a likely campaign outcome, given reasonable ideological or candidate incentives. When or through whom that idea penetrated public consciousness is not clear, but post-2008, it is already common knowledge. Along with a black president, such higher turnouts, once barely conceivable, are now part of history. The bigger the bang, the smaller the credit for the intellectual, because big-bang criticism must come from media-tested insiders or else must be first ignored and later assimilated into frames of reference as if it were common knowledge.

RULE TWO: THERE IS A STRAINED DIALECTIC OF PUBLIC PURPOSE AND INTELLECTUAL INDIFFERENCE

Lesson 4 (with Lesson 9): Tenure—Keeping the Romance Alive while Risking Collegial Deference

Many years ago, in another academic position, I commented in some interviews and a magazine article that several college/university programs were not working in the way that policymakers had assumed they would. The evidence was clear, and yet the reaction from multiple university administrators was both hostile and unmoved by data. It is difficult to image that most researchers who publish comments are not similarly threatened at some point. Tenure not only provides reassurance, but, in some cases, also provides incentives. Faculty members increasingly identify with their institutions and their goals and missions the longer they stay. When economic crises or demographic changes create pressure, creative criticism of related policies may finally get a public hearing. During the Vietnam War draft, faculties' public criticism of the war, such as that by Bernard Fall at my institution, was seen as benefiting their students.

To these more noble motives, Etzioni adds the value of receiving a steady income while irritating the powers that be. I would also add that the manageable work schedule and a community of potential or actual intellectual irritants are important assets.

Lesson 5: "Forehead-Slapping" Appeal, or Giving Intellectual Recognition to a Changing National Mood

A forehead-slapping piece, in Etzioni's colorful words, is one that offers some surprise to the reader as much because the specific observations are new as because the logic and analysis behind it are old. Readers' attentions are grabbed by statements that put things in a new light usually because the specific event is recast or reclassified, rather than because a new mood of analysis has emerged. In Etzioni's example, global uncertainty about the risks of a nuclear arms race meant that everyone agreed that nuclear build-up needed to be arrested, yet leaders continued to build bombs. As a consequence, the idea that building bombs would make the world safer seemed novel or striking, but it was still credible only to the extent that it was consistent with actual behavior. This frank recasting of behavioral norms is the PI's equivalent of making the reader look at the man in mirror. Most often, politically incorrect claims are recast in an analytical light that does not necessarily include more analysis.

More recently, a wave of post-Obama election articles in major papers like the *New York Times* have argued that black politics may be coming to a hasty end. These articles had forehead-slapping value for some readers because they referred strictly to the Obama campaign and a few other local and atypical campaigns. Since race consciousness in electoral campaigning has virtually never been separated from individual campaigning in media reports, a look at any black candidate was treated as an investigation of race through a universal lens. The fact that scholars who regularly discuss race were largely absent or excluded from these reports indicates the strength of social and media forces in generating these forehead-slapping moments. The audience must be ready and waiting for a reevaluation of relationships.

Every four-year election period, the larger political science associations, along with many other social science organizations, host major plenary sessions and roundtable and panel discussions centering on "new" approaches and methods in explaining and predicting voting patterns. Of course, no one would suggest that the cycles of methodological creativity or intellectual insight are geared to the presidential election cycle. On the contrary, this special research focus is supposed to serve as a value-free effort to make objective analysis more timely and relevant to the public. The goal of relevance is fine; the predictions are not, even when they prove to be right—which they rarely do.

These projects might be more credible if the associations did not expend extensive effort to attract media attention, hoping for C-SPAN, big city newspapers, radio, and other coverage. A hunt for publicity would not itself deform the objective mood if the search did not also prod the associations into making direct or indirect assertions of predictive reliability. Empirical specificity about the individual outcomes of the myriad variables involved in presidential choice can hardily be justified by research. Yet, papers presented in

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these conferences and published in their journals automatically buttress tenure and promotion demands, because they bear the imprimatur of disinterested research. On the other hand, the same prediction-related research that is summarized in the mass media is generally viewed as transgressing academic standards or, at the very least, as falling from the academy's graces.

RULE THREE: ACCEPT THE IDEOLOGICAL LIMITS OF MEDIA LANGUAGE AND CONCEPTS

Lesson 6: The Discomfort of Being Pigeonholed

Anyone that has written or been interviewed about politics among African Americans, Hispanics, or women (among other marginalized groups), has probably felt the bonds of being narrowly classified in the eyes of journalists and editors. This straitjacket is particularly restrictive for those of us who engage in frequent commentary with foreign media. The French-language media largely treated me as an American political analyst—except in France, where I was cast as an African American analyst until Obama's election. After November 2008, my pigeonhole was enlarged, and I was able to spend much of 2009 in France commenting broadly on American and international politics.

In the United States, neither Etzioni nor many political scientists, myself included, would fit within the normal ideological range of conservative media such as Fox News. Occasionally, one can pass as a marked "liberal." Still, such sharp ideological categorization is an essential part of all sustained intellectual intervention. In other words, PIs are, by their very nature, deprived of their claims to objectivity by the media selection process, and yet they are marked with the label of objectivity. I once did a long interview with a local Fox News station, and the trauma of the realization of what I had done was abated by the realization that I was being treated as a left-winger. The essential constraint is that there is only one liberal-conservative continuum that has virtually no nuances.

Lesson 7: Be a Specialist, Even When Making Broad Claims

Etzioni's communitarianism led him to make broad claims about social responsibility on the basis of broad theory. Had he made specific claims, however broad their reach, on the basis of narrow theory, however weak its linkages, he probably would not have had the same problems with media resistance. Editorial and journalistic insecurity is rampant in a world of changing markets, readership, and lawsuits. Because intellectual intervention is unnecessary, it is expected to be predictable. In interviews, it is rare to find an American journalist who does not clearly hint at the answer that he or she expects to receive to a question. Over the years, I have been repeatedly approached by a Washington newspaper to comment on the imminent political demise of former D.C. mayor Marion Barry. My comments have almost never been published, because I have never seen his political demise as imminent. Yet my comments on other mayors and local officials are nearly always included in articles. The fact that Barry's political career survives is my consolation, but newspapers show no remorse.

RULE FOUR: INTELLECTUAL COMMENTARY MAKES A POSITIVE DIFFERENCE FOR THE PUBLIC

Lesson 8: The Media Life of the Public Intellectual Is Short

Like anyone in the public eye, the media lifespan of the public intellectual is probably a lot shorter than he or she thinks it should be. When issues, events, or organizations with which they are closely associated grab the public's attention, these scholars may be in great demand; at other times, they may be forgotten. This pattern would be sad, if it did not disguise the potential success of sustained intellectual commentary. The media, journalists, and editors—and even the larger public—sometimes learn. They absorb the persistent lessons of commentators. These lessons have often been simplified through the ongoing pressure for the media to explain things in readily accessible language, but some of the basic message does get through. In conservative circles, this process seems to have occurred with the concept of supply-side economics. The message, already simplistic, was learned and, later, hopefully unlearned. For most political analysts, there is constant pressure to simplify messages in order to supplant more simplistic ones. Still, some messages get through to the public, as with misunderstandings about persistent voting rights constraints in the 1970s and 1980s that political analysts pointed out, and that the activist public later came to recognize.

Lesson 10: No Public Intellectual Is an Island: Ideas Require Cumulative Support

If you want to stop editors and reporters from annoying you, come up with an original idea or interpretation of an ongoing event. Intellectual commentary can and sometimes should appear to be original, but it had better not be fundamentally original if it is going to get a second media airing. Shocking events can justify creative interpretations, but only for a while. Journalistic control and security require both predictability and confirmation. The PI is invited to contribute to or is selected for an interview because his or her likely comments fit a journalistic frame of reference. The market for that commentary or interview is confirmed by the reaction of others in the media to it. The difference between praise and condemnation is perhaps less critical than the difference between indifference and indignation or affirmation. Because intellectuals do not fare well in the emotional context of indignation, they are largely consigned to the pursuit of affirmation by their newfound media colleagues. They may not constitute a community of scholars, but they are an understandable, though modest, alternative. ■

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