An Interview with Melissa Harris-Perry

Melissa Harris-Perry, *Wake Forest University*
Steve Friess, *freelance journalist*

Melissa Harris-Perry, a political scientist at Wake Forest University with a twice-weekly program on MSNBC, talked extensively to the task force members about developing relationships with "the translators." She recommended events where members of the press, particularly young and ambitious members, can get to know experts in fields of their interest. These events can help scholars and reporters develop relationships that lead to published articles that are more informed by political science and can help scholars better understand how to present their insights in more accessible ways.

While the media believes that economists and former political staffers "carry great and inherent weight" and expertise, "[p]eople do not understand what it is that political scientists know" or have to offer. To address this, she suggests:

- "Finding the ambassadors and building a relationship with the translators"—identify the political scientists who have relevant things to say about current/anticipated news cycles, and actively offer those people to the media: "If you want an expert, call X."
- "We, as a discipline, need to actively pitch a media A-team—identify a variety of key targets across different forms of media (print, electronic, TV/broadcast, social) and get our voices there. Concrete goals with a concrete team working on them."

Melissa Harris-Perry was interviewed by Steve Friess (SF), who has written for Time, Politico, and many other outlets.

STEVE FRIESS (SF) Let's start with general thoughts about what needs to happen to improve the public's understanding of political science, and what political scientists or APSA can do about these issues?

MELISSA HARRIS-PERRY (MHP) Let me address some of my concerns and then talk about what might be possible to improve understanding of political science. First, basic research matters. The professional standards with which we judge the quality of social science research, political science included, should not be beholden to the extent to which that research is discernable by audiences beyond our discipline. Although that might be a valuable asset of any given individual researcher, I find it irritating when, for example, the amount of grant dollars received are part of the tenure decisions for junior scholars in the natural sciences and laboratory sciences. And I would not want to see *New York Times* articles being a necessary component of a tenure file. There is inherent value in basic research in both laboratory sciences and the social sciences.

The second thing is that translation matters. There is a real need and value for people who can translate that basic research to external audiences. Translators can come both from within the discipline and outside of it. Probably the clearest example at this moment of a translator is Ta-Nehisi Coates, who writes about history, not political science. Ta-Nehisi is a national correspondent at *The Atlantic*, and in May of 2014 he published the cover story "The Case for Reparations," which set traffic records for the magazine's website and sale records at stores. The article incorporates some original journalism, but the vast majority of what informs that piece is really two decades of historical research about reparations and housing injustice. Ta-Nehisi is not a historian, but he is an exquisite translator.

The third thing to state about political science is that we have a value tool—our classrooms. Many students come to us because they love politics, because they were the kids in school who read the newspaper when all of their friends were reading something else. We often end up crushing those students' joy of real politics when we focus only on the science part of political science. As a discipline we could become more careful about nurturing undergraduate and graduate students' continued love for the engagement with the real political world. Ultimately, they will be both the consumers and the Congress members, and the folks who are going to be most valuable beyond the academy.

SF I'm interested in this distinction you make between people who are interested in politics and people who are interested in political science. That's a fascinating gap. Can you expand on that?

MHP Political science is a feeder undergraduate major for law school, and almost everyone in Congress is a lawyer. On every campus where I have taught, political science is almost always the largest undergraduate major, unless a business undergraduate major is offered. Many members of Congress probably have political science undergraduate degrees, but undergrads don't necessarily know that their teachers aren't only teachers. Most students think of us in front of a classroom, and I'm not sure they have any idea that we write books, or what we research, especially on larger campuses. It can be really hard to do the work—and often you don't have the resources to do the work—of engaging our students as producers of knowledge, to show them what it means to both love the political world and also do social science research. When we make that connection for our students, they become better readers of newspaper polls; they have a clearer sense of why it is important to continue funding national election studies. But we also can't be naïve and pretend that seeing the relevance of the discipline is simply a matter of creating understanding. Some of [the opposition to funding social science research] is simply ideological.

SF You are a very visible media figure. Explain how you went from being an academic egghead to being a TV talking head egghead.

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MHP Well, I certainly didn't mean to, and on most days, I'm pretty tortured about it.

SF Why?

MHP Largely because I am trained—both by Duke University, where I got my PhD, and by the University of Chicago, which was my first academic job—to value the academy more than the real world. The academy cares a lot about the production of research, but not always about its translation. So much of what I am doing on the show is translating our discipline to a wider audience. That probably makes me less valuable in the academy, which is the one club I really care about.

The way I started working in the media was sheer luck and opportunity in a lot of ways. I was a researcher of African American ideological diversity; [my] first book is about black Americans thinking differently about politics. I was working at the University of Chicago [in 2004] when Barack Obama ran against Alan Keyes for the US Senate. [University of Chicago media relations person] Bill Harms sent out a press release that said, "Hey, here is this historic moment in which two African Americans with very different political views are running against each other for the US Senate, and we have the foremost expert in the country on that issue, who has just published a book on it, on our faculty." That was probably a huge overstatement, but I got a lot of phone calls. I was all of about 27 years old when that happened. I'm not nervous when I speak publicly, and I'm willing to extrapolate from findings to make much broader statements, both ideologically and politically. Not all academics have those skills. We all were nerds coming through school, and some of us are socially awkward in more obvious ways. We're trained to speak long, so it can be hard to learn to speak briefly. And we are trained very carefully never to extrapolate beyond purely what our data can show. So, if your data can show this, then that is all you are ever meant to write down. And, probably in part because I was young, I was willing to say, "Oh, my data said this, so *probably* that." The "probably that" is what the media loves and the academy really hates: going beyond what your data can really show. I became a bit of a talking head about Barack Obama, and then Barack Obama became president. Because I was established so early as someone who would be willing to talk about him, I ended up with a Chicago-based track record of talking about Barack Obama. I moved to Princeton University in 2006; that put me in the New York media market, as a person who talked about Barack Obama, when he announced his candidacy in 2007. It was a unique set of circumstances. Also at that time, cable news was shifting our ideas of who anchors broadcast news from journalists to opinion people; then Rachel Maddow became MSNBC's anchorperson, changing the game of what kinds of people we think end up on air. And quite honestly, it mattered that at the time I was a professor at Princeton. Princeton has a cachet in a way unlike any other place I've worked.

SF Have you found that your prominence led people to think you were selling out? Have you heard from colleagues who aren't fond of your prominence?

MHP Oh, sure. I am more tortured about it because of internal angst about how the five minutes you have to share information on television are always so limited that you're leaving out so much. Everything that we say is one little piece of something so much more complicated, and I almost always have an awareness of how much more complicated it is. For example, when we're doing segments on race or gender, I always know that it is more complicated. When we're doing work on international relations [IR], because that's not my field, what we're saying is probably right, but I also know that my colleagues in IR must just be shaking their heads. Even though I don't know what the critique is, I'm sure it exists.

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The issue of other people's opinions about the show is a double-edged sword. I have many fans among colleagues, both within political science and beyond it, who understand the limitations of what's happening on air but respect that I am trying to do the work of translating. Of course, I also have many detractors. I certainly would not be doing this job had I not already been tenured at an Ivy League institution. I'd already reached as high as I needed to go to prove anything about my capabilities.

I have academic colleagues who are great on television and even guest host my show, but don't already have tenure. I worry about whether an Ivy League institution is going to be willing to tenure somebody who is occasionally a TV host.

SF So, let's flip this perspective around. You made the point that you don't think that being a visible media figure should help to secure tenure, and that tenure and academic achievement should be based on journal publications and research and other academic work. Do you think that it should hurt in tenure decisions? It sounds like you think being a translator could be a problem for some young scholars. What in the system creates this problem, and is it appropriate?

MHP I appreciate you asking the question that way. I do not think that it should hurt, except that there are 24 hours in a day, and there are standards that every academic must meet in order to receive tenure at any institution. To the extent that it is a zero-sum game of time and effort, if you can't accomplish what is necessary, then you haven't accomplished it. But, if you are one of those superhuman people who can do both, or if you make other trade-offs—if you don't sleep or have children or have a personal life—there is no reason [having] a very popular blog or [doing] multiple television appearances or [writing] regularly for an online publication should be detrimental to securing tenure. I have heard this in many tenure reviews: "Well, they have the book-and-a-half done; they have the handful of journal articles. But, if they weren't writing this public stuff, then there would surely be a second or a third book, or something." That reasoning

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punishes young scholars for making a choice to engage. There is a minimum CV necessary for tenure and promotion, but it's not true that if you weren't writing for a public space, or you weren't appearing on television, that you would necessarily be putting that time and effort back into academic work… It really is two different ways of engaging a question. Scholars can both be writing their academic voice and doing that kind of research, but then wanting to translate research for the public. The best translators are also sometimes the best teachers; when you're talking to 18-year-olds about these questions, you don't use the same language as you do in your journal articles. If you do, then your students will not understand you. So, I think it has to do with how big we imagine our classroom is. I don't think folks should be punished, but I also don't think it supplants academic work.

SF Has your experience as a media figure affected the way you think about political science and how you teach political science?

MHP Yes. The media think differently about various experts. Economists carry great and inherent weight. There is a presumption that economists simply know what they are talking about, and there is a sense that people who are Washington insiders—former staffers, people with direct political experience—offer valuable information. It is always valuable to hear from the former speechwriters of various presidents, but I am constantly battling to get political science colleagues on air. We put a lot of political scientists on air on my show. I think print journalists are better about [speaking to political scientists for stories], but for online and broadcast, there's no presumption that political scientists have unique information that can't be garnered by economists, who will tell you how the world works, or by political insiders, who will tell you how politics work. That is a real branding problem. People do not understand what it is that political scientists know, and what our cumulative knowledge is. There was a bright moment in 2008, when Senator Obama was running for president, and the media began to talk about the Bradley Effect. For everyone

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MHP Yes, in a couple of ways. I am now more interested in media as a political phenomenon because I have more of an insider's view.

I also teach differently, in part because I know audiences receive information in bits. I'm really interested in trying to teach my students how to be producers of information and not just consumers, particularly when it comes to data. And I do this even in classes that don't sound like they would involve data analysis. For example, in my hip-hop and feminism class, my students had to write papers based on public opinion surveys, and had to learn some statistical analysis. Students are frequently encountering statistical information in news reporting that is convincing to them, in one direction or another, when in fact it shouldn't be. I have learned that from doing media experiences and getting responses from people saying, "Well, 25 percent of folks… ", or even from my producers whipping out a poll as evidence, and I say, "Nope, that's not what that is." So that experience has changed how I teach.

It's also changed how I research. I have not accomplished much new research in about two years, basically since the [MSNBC] show has been on air. Everything I have done has been synthetic or finishing original research that I had begun before the show began. I feel okay about that because of where I am in my career, but the show has been death to my research; and to me, that's not acceptable over the long term.

SF We talked about the media from the political scientist's point of view, so now let's look at it from the other direction. Do political scientists need to try to explain their research more? Can't some of this research end up being consequential in the political world?

who had done work on the Bradley Effect, or on black mayors, it became clear that here was an actionable thing that political scientists knew about and could make some predictions about—

SF Even though that example turned out to be—

MHP Quite the opposite!

SF To be not great, really. It was something that appeared to be scientific and statistical, but turned out to be arbitrarily anecdotal.

MHP Absolutely, and, in fact, the effect, in the extent that it was an Obama Effect, was a reverse Bradley Effect, with more white voters actually casting ballots for Senator Obama than even had said so to researchers. Now, you hear my voice go up, because I thought that was ridiculously exciting—you have a hypothesis that is falsified! Now, we get to go back to the drawing board, and figure it all out—

SF Wasn't the hypothesis suspect in the first place? I recall lots of academic people—statisticians and so on—who said that wasn't what happened to Mayor Bradley in the first place.

MHP That is part of the point! All theory is contested terrain, and the fact is that there had been so few moments where black folks had run for these executive positions. The truth is, it really was a Doug Wilder effect because it was much clearer in the case of Wilder [in Virginia] that there was a much higher proportion of white voters claiming they were going to vote for him than who actually cast ballots for him. What you couldn't know was whether it was based on racial angst, on turnout, or on rain. It wasn't clear why; we knew that the bad effects really held particularly well for Wilder. The theory was just blown to

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smithereens by Obama in 2008. That continuing debate is an interesting one. What does it tell us about American race and politics? What does it tell us about public opinion? Does it reveal anything about the white American voter's heart? Whether or not the effect was accurate, that debate contributes to a public conversation. Here is a theory; let's engage what we think that tells us about who we are as a people. Political scientists are good at that. We have a variety of theories of how the world works; for instance, that democracies don't go to war with one another. Well, that seems to not be true, in an empirical capital-T true way, but it's a fascinating theory and it makes for more interesting and robust public debate. But we don't do a very good job of explaining how our field could do that.

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SF How do you fix that branding problem? What ideas do you have?

MHP Find the ambassadors and build a relationship with the translators. Where we are right now, it's probably worth figuring out the two dozen political scientists in the country who really have something to say about the world in ways that we expect are going to be relevant in the emerging six-month media cycle, or 12-month media cycle. So, as we head into 2015, who are the researchers of the 1965 Voting Rights Act? We can figure that out and do more than list them on a website. "If you want an expert, call X." We need to actively engage in a media strategy with our best people; and I don't necessarily mean our best researchers, I mean our best ambassadors in the field.

The second thing we need is key targets, both in old-fashioned print media and also broadcast media, both ideological and at least presumably nonideological broadcast media, as well as new media. As a discipline, we need to actively pitch a media A-team. It doesn't have to be the same team at every point. The one time the political scientists will actually get called is during election season, when public opinion researchers are needed to explain the polling data. There's value in having those researchers out front. For example, I thought there was a missed opportunity during the 2013 special election in New Jersey with Andra Gillespie, a young scholar at Emory University, who had just published a book about Cory Booker and spent years doing case study and living in Newark. She was interviewed only a few times during Booker's Senate campaign; she should've been everywhere. She's young, she's extremely good on television, and she was an expert in this field, but it wasn't clear to me that either Emory or APSA was pitching her to media.

SF Can you tell me the difference between a pundit and a political scientist? A lot of journalists don't know the difference. I frequently call political scientists as pundits.

MHP You can be both. I'm both pundit and political scientist. The primary distinction is political scientists—most academics really think of themselves as academics—will talk about what they know for sure. They will talk about what they are almost certain is true based on the depth of their research. Academics are narrow and very deep; they know everything there is to know about three things. Pundits are much broader but also much more shallow. I don't mean shallow with a negative connotation; just simply that they will know a little about far more topics, or are, at least, far more willing to offer opinions, commentary, and information. Honestly, the media really needs people who are willing to talk about just the narrowest of the narrow; they need people who are willing to extrapolate from what they are certain to what they think might likely be true; and getting comfortable doing that is that transition from political scientist to pundit.

SF Talk about the pace of journal publishing and how it may be discordant with the way the public debate works, and even how the political system works.

MHP The pace of journal publication is one of the primary problems facing the field, in about 10 ways. It's still the problem for the capacity to do media work, but it's also clearly a problem for junior people trying to get tenure. It takes six to 18 months to even get close to the publication stage. The solutions are difficult ones, and for junior faculty they take a little bit of courage. Are you willing to make some of your data available for public comment before it has been in the peer-reviewed publication process? For example, say you're a researcher at the University of Texas, and you have a survey that you have fielded, and you have some data and findings about immigration that are relevant to current political news that you feel you really need to present even though your research hasn't been peer-reviewed yet. There are many ways to make those data available publicly, and to make that analysis available publicly, but then it can impact your possibility of getting the research published.

From my own experience, Cathy Cohen, Michael Dawson, and I conducted research immediately after Hurricane Katrina. We had some of the first academically collected public opinion data on Katrina attitudes by race, and we knew we could not wait three years to get that information published. It needed to be presented. We wrote an initial report in the way that a government agency might write a report, or in the way a media agency might write a report. We got the report out via press release; we posted the data on a website. All three of us have written books since then; all three of those books have engaged some of the data, but we never got a journal article out of it because after it became pundit data it wasn't useful to answer the big academic questions. But Cathy and Michael were both full professors, and I was tenured within six months of collecting that data; we were brave in a way that if you're a junior faculty member, you often can't be.

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SF Given the efforts by senator Tom Coburn and others to divert funding from social science research, do political scientists need to recognize they are in political danger? Is there an irony here, that political scientists are not very astute of the current political winds?

MHP It's different than that. Many in the discipline are much more concerned that we are in an international and a domestic political environment in which it is so difficult to reach any kind of consensus or to govern. Almost everyone I know really loves either the United States or the countries that they study; they fundamentally care about the outcomes in those nations. When I say "love," I don't mean flag-waving patriotism; they actually care that good governance occurs and that people's lives are better. So this has been a hard moment to watch, whether you are on the Left or the Right. A recent APSA president said in her address to the discipline, "How can we sit here while they're literally shutting down the government? The thing that we study is government, and the government is shutting down!" This isn't about whether we blame Democrats or Republicans; this is about the fact that we seem to no longer have very good tools for governing, and we must be failing as a discipline if our nation is failing. Part of it is about our funding, but part of it is also our sense that we care about democracy.

SF One of the areas of political science right now that is interesting and useful is the examination of how early voting has influenced the outcome of elections, and then, of course, all of the efforts to try to limit early voting. You talk about this a lot on your show; is it something you research?

MHP Absolutely. This is also part of the translation problem. We talk about liberal access to the ballot, and I can't say "liberal access to the ballot," because it sounds like the wrong kind of liberal. Political scientists figured out how motor-voter registration would increase turnout and that same-day registration and early voting would reduce barriers and increase turnout. We've done work around how to increase youth turnout. The pundits say, "You have to get people excited!" but the research says, actually, no, here are the things standing in the way of young people being able to vote, and it has everything to do with mobility in society and the difficulty of getting registered when there aren't long windows before an election to get registered. Political scientists understand those mechanisms, and that was the research I learned at Duke.

SF Thank you so much for your time. I appreciate it. ■

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