



The UKZN Griot. Of Publics and Populism

BY:

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Academics can change the world. But there is a rider, says Savo Heleta, in *The Conversation* [1]. Academics must stop talking (only) to their peers.

Heleta's post elicited the usual rambling responses, mostly missing the point, plus one connecting the story with my February Griot column. Heleta observes that academics are not rewarded for engaging with the public. Rather, academics are unrelentingly chased by their increasingly remote managers to publish. They are unrewarded when publishing in popular mags, newspapers, and other platforms (TV, performances, radio, exhibitions, blogs, public lectures etc), from which most people get their information. Knowledge is assumed to occur only in a mysterious set of obscure journals known as 'accredited'. Mucking about in the popular media is seen to be frivolous.

This was not always the case. Maintaining town-gown relations was once considered important, especially when UKZN's Eleanor Preston-Whyte was DVC of Research (1990-2000). In the 1980s, the university hosted and protected from the Security Police more than 70 community-based projects, which resulted in the beneficiaries categorising the University as historically Black. If universities are in the business of shaping society, inventing techniques and technologies, and solving structural problems, then academic activities and knowledge must be popularised.

Our funding largely comes from the public and the public must benefit. That's the whole point of *The Conversation* [2]. Where most academic articles are rarely cited, individual stories on this web magazine can attract hundreds of thousands of readers. Even academics want an easy read at times! It is unclear, however, how many lay readers or students read *The Conversation*.

The Conversation Africa's total readership through republishing by other media houses from 7 May 2015 till 12 March 2016 was 7 812 123. Total onsite readership was 608, 219. Top media republishers include *Mail & Guardian* (M&G), *IOL News*, *Times Lives*, EWN, eNCA, SABC, Quartz Africa, IFL Science, and All Africa. Rarely has anyone from UKZN published in *The Conversation*.

UKZN once regularly fed copy to newspapers, when articles from *Indicator SA*, put out by the Centre for Social and Development Studies, were regularly syndicated. A few well-known academics currently write weekly columns. For a while in 2013, *The Mercury* published Academic Voices, in which UKZN staff wrote, and then lost its nerve. *M&G* relies heavily on articles penned by academics. Otherwise, space has to be purchased, as is the case with the Tertiary Times pages in *The Mercury*.

At one point in mid-the 2000s, M&G seemed to be the official archive for dissident UKZN staffers trying to get their arguments taken seriously within the Institution. *The Natal Witness Echo* (township supplement) reproduced my entire inaugural lecture in two parts in 1986, while the high brow *Financial Mail* made fun of its title in its "Did You Hear" back page.

When I organised my first conference in 1977, Media and Change, *The Star* reported on and published every paper presented, resulting in massive publicity for Wits thanks to James Clarke and now, crime novelist, Mike Nichols, who comprised the reporting team. My presentation that predicted the coming of cybersex made the then disreputable back page of the muck-raking *Sunday Times*. In 2005, Independent Newspapers (IN) in Durban assigned one of its journalists, Marlan Padayachee, to work with CCMS on an international seminar for one day a week for a year. He produced a full colour glossy newspaper on the seminar in the internal IN house paper. IN also sponsored an annual lecture on media freedom, august speeches later published in dusty peer-reviewed journals. The partnership was very successful.

When academics talk only to other academics we use specialised language largely incomprehensible to everyone else. We further isolate ourselves within disciplinary discourses. It can take decades to learn to write accessibly but then one runs the risk of peer-alienation. In contrast, the admin discourse includes the most uttered phrase in South African academia, 'Is the journal accredited?' followed by, 'Did you achieve your PUs?' And, 'What's your throughput rate?'

Opportunities for fundraising by universities are enhanced when their work is promoted in language that the public and donors understand. Universities are then seen as relevant, not just places where students burn things, where lecturers talk in code and are chased by rampaging mobs, themselves targeted by armoured private security squads, who then get reported by dissident staff and students for using excessive force, and who then in seminars theorise about the legitimacy of protesters using violence, even against innocent parties who just get in the way. Phew!

As a young academic I cut my teeth writing for all sorts of trade mags and newspapers, popular, political and high culture arts periodicals, stuff that people actually read. I once conducted a tutorial for a vice-chancellor on how to write an op-ed newspaper column. My student went glaze-eyed when I tried to explain the geometry of newspaper stories involving the inverted triangle which organises structure for readers – at the top (start of the story, the outcome) is the most important stuff, followed by supporting

info, then fluff that can be cut depending on column centimetre availability. Academics just don't write like this. Increasingly, neither do journalists as newsroom capacity is streamlined, juniorised and gutted.

My role model for the civically engaged academic is the physicist in the TV cop drama, *Numbers*. He applies mathematical solutions in predicting criminal behavior for the FBI. Now, that's research that is useful, has public benefit, and can also get written up in calculus and published in peer-reviewed journals. The programme is also education entertainment as it makes maths sexy, exciting and relevant.

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References

1. [Academics can Change the World – but only if they stop talking to their peers](#)
2. <http://theconversation.com/africa>, which observes that a well-functioning democracy requires an equally well informed citizenry.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this column are the author's own.