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The Role of “Intellectual” in the Academic Role-Set¹

In the Act (from 1995) regulating the system of Norwegian higher education, it is stated that the universities and state colleges (also) shall disseminate (*formidle*) scientific knowledge to a broader public. Dissemination as a disciplinary task for universities came into Norwegian university laws after W.W.II, first in the law regulating the activities of the new university in Bergen, soon to be found also in the law for the University of Oslo (Forland 1996: 256). The Norwegian laws formalized long and vital traditions dating back to the Age of Enlightenment. The early modernized, protestant North Sea culture became a stronghold for enlightenment traditions during the 18th century (Engelstad et al. 1998:266-271, Voss 1997). According to Berend and Ránki (1982: 56), by “mid-nineteenth century, the number of illiterate adults in Scandinavia was no more than 30 per cent; In Norway, everyone under 50 was able to read and write. (In England, the figure for illiteracy was 33 per cent, in France 40- 45 per cent).” In Southern Europe it was 75- 80 percent, in the Balkans 95 (ibid.).

In their classical contribution *The American University* (1973) Parsons and Platt thematized the same type of activity, dissemination, as the “intellectual” task of American universities, where academics should contribute “to the general cultural definition of the situation” (p. 6, cf. also 267ff). French and Scottish enlightenment impulses became influential on the North American continent during the second half of the 18th century. With reference to German universities Habermas has pointed to the existence of a

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long- and partly distorted- tradition of public dissemination and *Aufklärung*, going back to the end of the 18th century (Habermas 1981, 1989a, b, 1996).

He convincingly insists on the lasting realism of the bundle conception of universities (Parsons), comprising four interdependent processes of inquires. He ties this to the original Humboldt-conception of “unities”: “the unity of research and teaching, the unity of science and scholarship with general education, the unity of science and scholarship with enlightenment, and the unity of the scientific and scholarly disciplines” (1989a: 122).

The focus of this paper is on the (individual and institutional) task of the translation of knowledge and insights from a specialized research community to audiences outside of the specialty. I generally label this the “intellectual” task of universities and university academics, but use the concepts of dissemination and public discourse as closely related expressions. In the generalized perspective used here then, all academics may have an intellectual task.

There are serious terminological problems in this area. In the American setting it is often vaguely referred to “service” as a general third task for universities, in addition to research and teaching/study. The reference to “public intellectuals” (in the American sense) is more in accordance with the type of activity discussed here than “service” (which often also refers to administrative work and professional services for clients). My use of the concept “intellectual” is somewhat similar to Lipset’s generalized use in *Political Man* (Ch. 10). He refers to three areas (art, science, religion), the creators of culture (as authors and scientists) and the disseminators of culture (as actors, musicians and teachers). My focus is then on science and scientists as creators and disseminators of knowledge. My terminology also has much in common with Merton’s use of “intellectuals” as persons in limited and ordinary social roles, devoting “themselves to cultivation and

formulating knowledge.....we normally include teachers and professors among the intellectuals” (Merton 1968: 263).

The general identification of this task has become problematic. According to my experience in several universities in different parts of the OECD-area, there is a strong tendency today to make invisible or misidentify this type of activity. The task is often misidentified as PR (for a researcher, program, institute or university). But PR- and related activities-is a form of leadership task, connected to the self-governance of scientific institutions. Activities as PR and fund-raising are important and legitimate tasks within university disciplines, but are analytically separate from the one focused here. Dissemination and public discourse may have positive and negative consequences for visibility and money resources, but these are essentially byproducts of intellectual activities (dissemination and public discourse).

There are relatively few theoretical contributions and much uncertainty about the more precise character of this intellectual task as (more or less) institutionalized practices in universities, included the question if it really is a (primary) disciplinary task in the bundle of inquiries going on in universities. There are few case studies, representative surveys or comparisons (e.g. between disciplines, institutions, nations or historical periods) about how and to which degree this task is actually realized in universities around the world. In the following I try to identify the task and document some of the Norwegian activity in this area. I had hoped to have some more concrete comparative material in the paper at this stage, making it possible to compare Scandinavian, German and American universities in this field, but have not come that far yet. As it now stands this is a paper oriented toward the identification of an important academic task and to the clarification and creation of interesting research questions.

1. What is the academic doing in the role of “intellectual”?

When I speak of an academic engaged in dissemination of scientific knowledge and insight, I refer to a researcher communicating findings, general insights and methodological approaches and evaluations from a specialized research field to a public outside of the actual field. I also refer to academics participating in discourses within broader publics, when their contributions to a significant degree is based on scientific knowledge.

Dissemination and public discourse generally requires (more or less) translation into a language that is understandable for non-members of the specialty. In order to be interesting it also generally have to be explicated in ways different from the specialty. Such dissemination may consist in disseminating one's own research or that of others, it may be oriented towards the presentation of new findings, but also to the dissemination of old insights, for instance those established by Newton, Toqueville or Darwin. It may also consist in taking a stand on essential issues of the day or trying to get new issues onto a public agenda.

The academic role-set

Scientific disciplines can be analyzed as constellations and combinations of five different institutional programs, resulting in five types of end-products: 1) *research programs* resulting in publications; 2) *teaching and study programs* resulting in educated students on different levels; 3) *intellectual programs*, dissemination and public discourse, resulting in scientific literacy in a broader public and contributions to public discourses, learning going in all directions; 4) *“professional”, or expert programs*, as giving useful advice or contribute to direct development for users (such as enterprises, state administration and individual clients); and 5) *self-governance programs* resulting in well functioning institutions, such as good university departments

(Kalleberg 2000a: 229-232). The role-set of the university academic, then, consists of five primary roles: researcher, teacher, intellectual (disseminator), expert and academic citizen (active in selfgovernance or delegating governing responsibilities to others).²

In programs of dissemination and general discourse, academics do not primarily communicate with colleagues as in research fields with peer control, not with students as in teaching and study situations, and not (as experts) with clients and other users. In this “intellectual context” academics interact with those outside of the specialty, i.e. non-specialists, all those who are not members of the focused research specialty. The intended end-results of work within this program are not specialized, graduated students or problem-solving for clients and other users, but improved knowledge and insight for people outside of the research specialty, included learning for the specialist now moving in this broader context of communication.³

2. What do we know about the intellectual task of dissemination and public discourse?

The task of dissemination as a basic disciplinary task in itself, is not only poorly identified, but also poorly documented. To my knowledge, there are few empirical studies of such activity in any national community and hardly any comparative studies. (On some exceptions to the rule that there are few studies in this area, see Shinn and Whitley 1985, Nelkin 1995). I know of no in-depth, comprehensive study of dissemination and public discourse in any

² I (Kalleberg 2000a) have reworked Merton’s conception of role-set somewhat (cf. Merton 1968: 422-38, 1973: 519-22, 1976, Ch. 1).

³ The specification of audience (or public) is important to identify institutional context and nature of the task. Merton (1968: 266) distinguishes, for instance, between bureaucratic and unattached intellectuals according to “a difference in the “client” of

OECD-country. This sub-field of research is not only seriously underdeveloped, but also seriously distorted. Research-questions about this area nowadays are either not asked or tend to be distorted, perverted into instrumental questions about PR and lobbying strategies. (On the silencing and perversion of research questions, cf. Engelstad et al. 1998, Ch. 4).

Let us have a look at the Norwegian setting. If one looks at what is documented from universities themselves, from research councils or state ministries, one would say that there is little dissemination being performed in the Norwegian system. According to the University of Oslo's *Yearly Report* from 1997, for instance, academics in the Medical Faculty were almost invisible in this arena during that year. Norwegians reading newspapers and listening to the radio, know that this was not correct. Norwegian medical researchers regularly publish in a Norwegian Journal for medical practitioners and for the interested public, a publication much read, cited and discussed. Physicians are regularly reported and interviewed in the mass media and they take part in public discourse. This was therefore not a case of lack of such disciplinary activity, but of little or no reporting of it. Under-reporting is typical for most fields and institutions, being a function of inadequate reporting routines, as it was concluded in a recent report from the University of Oslo (UiO 1999: Ch. 3).

But there are some relevant contributions in this area, even one survey. Kyvik (1994) sent a questionnaire (in 1992) to all faculty members of the rank of assistant professor or higher at Norway's four universities (in Oslo, Bergen, Trondheim and Tromsø). He shows that 48% published at least one popular article (i.e. dissemination) during the three-year period 1989-91, on average 1.8 articles. (The average number of scientific publications in the same period was 8). More humanists were active in publishing of popular

the two kinds of intellectuals": specific policy-makers and one or another general public

scientific articles than natural scientists (68% vs. 43%). 30 percent of the faculty published at least one contribution to public debate in the same period, varying between 50 percent in the social science and 17 percent in technology” (op.cit.:145). As with scientific publication the data showed large differences in productivity between academics. One fifth of the researchers were responsible for 50% of the scientific output. The dissemination pattern was even more skewed: “Half of all popular scientific articles are published by 6 percent of the faculty and only 4 percent of the researchers have published half of the contributions to public debate” (op.cit.:147).

Now and then it is assumed that dissemination is external to science, primarily undertaken by non-scientists, ex-scientists and failed scientists. Kyvik found on the contrary, that 96% of those who had published for the general public had also published scholarly work in the same period. He documents that “the most productive researchers in terms of scientific publishing has also placed most emphasis on non-scientific publishing”. Those having been active in dissemination “have published about 60 percent more article equivalents than those who have not published scientific literature. There are only small differences between the fields in this respect” (Kyvik 1994:148).

Case studies of specific authors may learn us much about this activity. The leading Norwegian sociologist in the second half of the 20th century was Vilhelm Aubert, internationally recognized as a leading scholar in sociology of law (for an overview, see Kalleberg 2000b). Aubert underlined the importance of the intellectual role. Let us just focus on three points here. First: Aubert insisted on the dialogical character of dissemination and public discourse, as clearly was the case with him. Learning goes in both directions. Second: Aubert generally wrote for several audiences at the same time, not only for other sociologists, for a general public or for students. When we

(also p. 536).

construct conceptions of academic tasks and role-sets, we have to generalize to find similarities between several different disciplines. But these are analytical distinctions. It is more natural to have a distinction between scientific and general audiences in the natural sciences than in the social and cultural ones.⁴ It is not unusual to publish books and articles in disciplines like history and sociology that are directed to the colleague and the “interested layman” at one and the same time. Third: Aubert insisted on the importance of picking relevant problems, also in basic research. He did not accept the OECD-distinction between basic and applied research as adequate for the social sciences. As a rule, pure, basic research in social science should be focused on significant conditions, problems and challenges in society. The general relevance of the study is stated from the outset (Aubert 1973).

There are some general remarks that can be made after this short presentation of a small scientific community and its interplay with a small population (4.3 million), living in a large area (larger than Germany), located in the north-western corner of Europe, that part of the world often talked about as the “cradle of capitalism“ (Voss 1997) in the early modern period, or the cradle of “modern society“ (Parsons 1977:141ff). First: It is easy to overlook and forget this intellectual task of dissemination and public discourse, due to inadequate documentation and very little research on it. Secondly: When wanting to understand what goes on in Norwegian universities, we would

⁴ This has to do with several factors, such as a) the general competence of the audience. The level of mathematical competence is low in the general population of the capitalist democracies. (Surprisingly-in relation to how easy this type of “language” is?). This is then an important hurdle for direct communication. It also has to do with b) possible contexts of application. Natural sciences produces possible technologies that can be left to experts, whereas knowledge from the cultural and social sciences are absorbed by society through processes of dialogues and self-transformation (contributions to the definition of the situation) (cf. the characteristic “double dialogue” of the social sciences and the fact following from the “Weber-insight” about the importance of reasons in human behavior. Engelstad et al. 1998: 117-120, 89).

get a distorted picture if we did not analyze dissemination and contributions to public discourse as part of the bundle of inquiring activities constituting Norwegian university science. It is probably at least as important to understand the research-dissemination-public-discourse nexus as the research-study nexus (cf. Clark 1995) in order to understand what goes on in and around universities. Thirdly, the fact that social scientists are more active in this field than natural scientists, should not create worries among social scientists about the closeness to ordinary language and assumed corresponding low levels of scientific formalization and sophistication. Generally spoken this closeness to ordinary language is desirable and not something to worry about, contrary to a misguided positivist interpretation of the social and cultural sciences.

3. On the weak institutionalization of dissemination in universities

According to my knowledge, the function of dissemination is poorly institutionalized in universities in the OECD- world. Parsons and Platt showed how the functions of research and advanced teaching, professional training and general education were assigned to different institutions within the university: the graduate schools, the professional schools and the colleges. The fourth function, of “contributing to the general cultural definition of the situation“, is described as a task “which has not become so formally institutionalized in organizational divisions of the university system“ (p. 6; cf. also p. 104). But the authors insist that it is a task for universities and part of the role-set of professors. Parsons and Platt see nothing natural in the existing lack of institutionalization. They speak of a “structural vacuum“ and note that there “does not now exist any specific organizational framework within the university structure for meeting this ideological need, and so far there has not been a strong demand for it“ (p.

292). My impression of the (elite part of the) American university system, is that this is still a valid description. If anything has changed, this function seems to have become weaker during the last quarter of a century, whereas the importance of PR-strategies seems to have become stronger.

This can be identified as a paradoxical and worrisome development that should be studied in its own right. It is paradoxical when related to what happens with public culture and public space in the rich capitalist democracies. Rationality in public discourse today is under pressure from business enterprises, the entertainment industry, commercialized mass media, one-sided special interest groups and technocratic science. Powerful organizations and institutional forces commercialize and instrumentalize public space and deform enlightenment traditions into entertainment. Such developments are also paradoxical when contrasted with educational level in the population. In nations like the UK, the Netherlands, Norway and the US more than half of the persons in each new age group now get some higher education.

Such developments can be discussed as worrisome. A “deformed civic consciousness“ and “distorted public agendas“ (Dahl 1982:43- 47) are among the most serious problems capitalist democracies face today. Bender (1997: 47) presents this diagnosis of the problems (on the American scene) and one essential element in a desirable cure: “The dissolution of a public sphere and the limited role of academic intellect in whatever survives of that sphere is worrisome...Restoring a place for academic knowledge in the public culture and a role for public discussion in academic culture ought to be a high priority of both academic and public leaders.” The bundling of research and dissemination, and the resulting learning in both directions through these

processes of inquiry, are of decisive importance for democratically and culturally sustainable development of pluralist democracies.⁵

Institutional redesign

When something is regarded as important enough, institutions are created to produce, maintain or control it, it is not just left to the good will of atomized individuals. It is no coincidence that we live in organizational societies. Universities are large institutions that can affect such developments by their acts and their passivity. They could at least counteract such tendencies of eroding rationality in public discourse and could have as one of their responsibilities that of creating public space, within themselves and in cooperation with schools, media and institutions in civil society, facilitating open and enlightened public discourse. Universities can conceive themselves as central institutions in the historical projects of enlightenment (Kalleberg 2000a).

Such perspectives requires institutional imagination and redesign. An example is reform-processes set in motion at the University of Oslo. An internal policy document about dissemination is interesting in this context. The report contains descriptions, evaluations and recommendations. The package of recommendations requires a certain amount of documented dissemination for people applying for academic positions, introduces

⁵ Bender (1973) seeks a deeper contextualization of the relationship between "academic knowledge and political democracy in the age of the university". He takes criticizes Hanna Arendt's distinction between academic and political truth, because it "could isolate academic intellect. That tendency or result could in turn pose an unnecessarily formidable difficulty for a vision of academic intellects's involvement in a democratic culture and polity" (p. 128). He points to "our blindness to the contexts" to explain the distinction. I think this is a fruitful approach. It is possible to come further here by leaving his misconception of Habermas (see p. 138), who has actually convincingly criticized Arendt's distinction (cf. Habermas 1985). Merton's powerful insistence on the

dissemination practices into higher grade studies, suggests different forums for dissemination and public discourse - within the university itself and in cooperation with schools, mass media and other institutions in civil society - increases the sum of money for the University's annual prize for dissemination, introduces improvements of the regular documentation of this activity, suggests ways of stimulating more research on actual dissemination and makes academic leaders (especially the 66 chairpersons, 8 deans and one rector) responsible for the regular dissemination in their respective units (UiO 1999).

4. Inquiry as public discourse: External or internal requirement?

Is dissemination an external requirement, for example imposed by state authorities or an external board of directors? Or is it-or could and should be- an integral part of disciplines and their processes of inquiry? I think it is an integral part. But how can we argue for this position? If we focus on Scandinavian, German and North-American traditions, one can look at actual scientific traditions and how this relationship actually has been perceived and practiced (see e.g. Slagstad 1998, Brunkhorst 1987, Bender 1992). One can also look at principled arguments within theory of science about this connection. (Or arguments that can be made by reconstructing fertile traditions). Within the longer traditions of German "idealism" (from Kant to Habermas), American "pragmatism" (from Peirce and Dewey to Putnam) and Norwegian "folkedannelse"⁶ (from Sundt to Aubert and Skjervheim) there are to be found good arguments.

internal connection between science and democracy (both adhering to universalism) can also be further developed in this context.

⁶ Language-wise easiest to translate into German: *Volksbildung*, but more similar to early American developments in substance. For some of the history of this specific

The classical argument was given by Kant in the next to last chapter in *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787). Kant developed here some interesting conceptual distinctions that are useful in our context (op. cit. 653- 665; cf., Engelstad et al. 1998:272-73). Kant distinguishes between the “school concept” and the “world concept” of a scientific discipline. The first concept refers to the *esoteric* specialties of a science. In order to move ahead in a scientific field, esoteric specialization is necessary. But disciplines are also *exoteric*. According to Kant they are constituted as part of the “world“. He talks about “that in /science/ which everyone necessarily has an interest“ in. I take that to refer to our deep-seated, common knowledge-interests in relation to nature, society and culture.⁷

Kant refers to the “world” (*Welt*) in the meaning of the “public sphere“ (*bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit*), where free and equal citizens participate in processes of opinion- and will-formation, related to common interests, problems and challenges. In this world of public discourse, there are ideally only free and equal participants. According to this interpretation it seems reasonable to claim that from the start science is located in the public sphere. In the last instance science has to legitimate itself, its general themes and approaches, to this broad public forum. According to the logic of this argument, esoteric academic scholars should also contribute as exoteric public intellectuals.

(comparatively spoken) egalitarian and democratic cultural development, cf. Lund 1917, Seip 1975: Ch. V, Høydal ed. 1995, Engelstad et al. 1998: Ch. 11, Slagstad 1998.

⁷ Focusing on knowledge-constitutive interests, Habermas (1978) has articulated a similar argument, without accepting Kant’s metaphysical and monological assumptions, (for a short presentation, see pp. 301-317).

Academics and public discourse in liberal democracies: Has the intellectual role become more or less important during the last half century?

Dissemination and public discourse as wanted in contemporary universities is however a more recent phenomenon. Habermas (1989b: 76,91) notes that the role of the intellectual was established much later in Germany than in France. (And we might add: much later than in Scandinavia and in the US). Such a role was first established in Western Germany during the 1950s and 60s. The members of the “Frankfurt School” were instrumental in this development (cf. Albrecht et al. 1999). Habermas makes the observation that “the intellectual acquires a *specific* role only when he is able to address a public opinion formed by the press and the struggle between political parties. Only in the constitutional state does the political public sphere become the medium of, and serve to reinforce, the process of democratic will-formation” (1989b: 72). Dissemination and public discourse today can not be a plea for some version of platonic kings as governors of society, for example in the form of an intellectual elite enlightening a large, uneducated *populus*. As a modern intellectual in a liberal democracy, the academic participating in public discourse are on the same level as other citizens.⁸

Even in the most egalitarian of the nations in the north-western corner of Europe during the middle of the 19th century, the passion for enlightenment was mainly thought of as an educational and social elite educating the “lower classes.” In Norway, say from the 1830s to the 1870s, it was both a social elite believing in enlightenment because it was useful and a value in

⁸ This means that this constellation of institutionalized task for universities in a certain sense is a relatively new phenomenon as far as “democracy” in our contemporary understanding of it is basically a very recent phenomenon, belonging to the 20th century (Dahl 1989):

itself and an elite that feared the uneducated farmers, having got a strong influence in the political system, could misuse their power.

The enthusiasm for public discourse and debate in civil society so characteristic for young Norwegian academics during the 1960s and 1970s (cf. Kalleberg 1998) was a different type of passion for enlightenment, although it was connected to the classical understanding of publics enlightening themselves. Central in this understanding was the ambition of contributing to the processes of opinion and will-formation in civil society, essentially only coordinated with “the force of better arguments” (Habermas), i. e. processes of opinion and will-formation characterized by egalitarianism and fallibilism. In such processes there are only equal participants. Rawls (1994:214, 383) describes the ambition well: “in a democratic society public reason is the reason of equal citizens....There are no experts”, no platonic philosopher-kings not having to defend their own views and not be influenced by listening to others.

The intended audience for dissemination and public discourse, is the laity. I.e. the liberal public. A “lay“ person in this context is a person not belonging to the specialized research community. **One increasingly important category in the modern laity in contemporary advanced societies, is made up of academics in other disciplines than the focused one.** It is a basic experience in modern societies that every one of us is a lay person in relation to what actually exists of specialized knowledge in almost all fields of knowledge.

It is possible to argue that dissemination has become less important than 50 or 100 years ago. The reason is that the proportion of the population that has got some higher education has risen in such a dramatic way. If one identifies the laity with the uneducated portion of the society, as Shils (1984:73- 77) seems to be doing, I think we open up for increasingly irrelevant discussions about the intellectual role in today’s capitalist democracies. If the only *raison d’être* for dissemination was to communicate

to and with people with no higher education, the motive for engaging in it would be much weaker than 50 or 100 years ago.

It is also possible to argue that dissemination and the intellectual role has become more important than, say, 50 or 100 or 150 years ago. The necessity and desirability of dissemination today is primarily based on intellectual problems and challenges in a highly educated population living in specialized, fragmented liberal societies, striving to maintain and develop themselves as competitive economies, deliberative democracies, welfare societies and societies where culture (science, arts, education) is a value in its own right.

The problems and challenges of modern democracies requires integration of knowledge and insights from many fields. We can neither understand nor master ecological problems without the cooperation and coordination of different scientific disciplines, such as political science and biology. This is also the situation in other problem areas. To understand and improve the situation in many problem areas requires an integrated, enlightened understanding, which – in pluralist democracies – can primarily be developed through public discourse; where important parts of such discourse takes place between people trained in different disciplines and active in a large number of roles, general citizen roles included.

Let me just end with some scattered remarks. a) Such publics consisting of specialists from different disciplines can secure an extended form of peer-control. On some important areas it is easy to see the need for it, as when biologists “popularize” to the rest of us (as a Norwegian biologist recently did) that “biological research shows that the institutionalization of equality between men and women is against nature.” He clearly could have gained essentially in argumentative strength after some contacts with social anthropologists. b) Such publics, to my experience, are excellent for dissemination out of the university. When a biologist is able to get a social

researcher to understand an argument, the main work for general dissemination is basically done. (And vice versa). c) Such publics may be essential in helping participants create more relevant research questions. d) The lack of contact between specialized disciplines can help us better understand the paradox development in the capitalist democracies: deteriorating quality in the mass media and improved educational quality in the population. The lack of sophistication in the cognitive contacts between specialties is in a sense in accordance with this development. e) With regard to the history of universities, this field can be connected to one of the Humboldtian unities: the unity of all sciences.

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Contents

THE ROLE OF “INTELLECTUAL” IN THE ACADEMIC ROLE-SET.....	1
1. What is the academic doing in the role of “intellectual”?	4
The academic role-set	4
2. What do we know about the intellectual task of dissemination and public discourse?.....	5
3. On the weak institutionalization of dissemination in universities.....	9
Institutional redesign	11
4. Inquiry as public discourse: External or internal requirement?	12
Academics and public discourse in liberal democracies: Has the intellectual role become more or less important during the last half century?	14
References.....	17