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Who let the docs out?: Trials, tribulations, and thrills in media studies

Melis Behlil

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In trying to envision any future for media studies, the pessimist and the optimist in me seem to engage in a game of tug of war. On the one hand, pressures on academics – be it financial, political, and/or practical – have been mounting across the disciplines and across the world. On the other hand, as media scholars, I think we are now more indispensable than ever. With a global pandemic that has had billions glued to their screens for months on end, the world needs to explore its relationship with the media it consumes in all its aspects. This seems to be the first time we can come rushing in valiantly when somebody asks, ‘Is there a doctor in the house?’ Whether the world knows it needs us or not is a separate issue, of course.

Let me start out with the pressures and the challenges. Over the last decades, the practice of generating funding for one’s own research appears to have become the norm in our field, as it has been for some time in natural sciences and engineering. As a scholar with a strongly humanities-leaning film studies background, I find the normalisation of this tendency alarming. Trying to justify humanities research in terms of possible tangible end results that might preferably be turned into financial gain tends to be futile, especially in contexts where the funding bodies have been shaped by natural sciences and engineering. What is regarded ‘fundable’ determines the framework of our research, and more theoretical discussions and enquiries, which are the backbone of scientific thought, risk being reduced to mere minutiae.

Another sore topic for academics today is publication pressure. Not only are we expected to ‘publish or perish’, as the old adage goes, but some of us need to publish in specific journals or in journals that are listed in particular indexes. While I do not have the capacity or the space here to go into details

of how the profit model of academic publication is mostly based on unpaid academic labor, some of these publishing expectations lie directly at odds with other demands – namely, those of funding bodies to have one’s research openly accessible. These pressures are exacerbated by professional uncertainties in the age of the adjunct faculty and temporary contracts, where the most significant time commitment for a scholar ends up being not research or teaching, but writing grant and job applications.

Adding to this, I happen to work in a country where the government openly and directly attacks academia, trying to suppress all dissenting voices, using physical and judiciary force if deemed necessary. Over the last five years, 822 Turkish academics (including myself) have gone on trial for having signed a petition calling their government to end a war in the Kurdish region and seek a peaceful resolution.[1] Some of them, and hundreds more for other political reasons, have been fired from their jobs, had their passports confiscated, and were prevented from finding other jobs. And as the only national research funding body in the country is a state-run apparatus, these academics remained on an unofficial blacklist for several years. Even without the blacklist, research topics that might be considered risky by the authorities (which is anything that goes against the official discourses) do not stand a chance of being funded, creating a self-censorship mechanism for academics. More recently, the government targeted individual universities, attacking prestigious state universities by appointing university rectors hand-picked and loyal to the president in order to clear these institutions from ‘unwanted’ influences. All these pressures have resulted in an unprecedented brain drain towards Europe, the US, and Canada. While things may be extreme in Turkey, our colleagues in Hungary and Poland are facing similar hardships.

A more direct challenge for media scholars (and one we might be able to actually do something about) is to demonstrate and substantiate the importance of media studies in an age when media has become the source of much evil, especially through the spread of misinformation. Reinstating the importance and validity of rigorous research and the value of ‘truth’ may not fall solely on the shoulders of media scholars, but it is a formidable task. To complicate the issue, the reinstatement of scientific truths should not have to mean the eradication of multiple subjectivities (which is now seemingly dismissed as ‘identity politics’ – a word that has grown to have an unfair share of negative connotations). This is not a dichotomy, considering that as media scholars we need to be as interested in the relationship between reality and its perception as we are in reality itself.

Further challenges (as well as opportunities) present themselves in research methods; the constantly evolving way we consume the media, including on apps and platforms, demands new approaches and inventive methodologies. One of the last conferences I was able to attend in person was in fact titled *Research Methods in Film Studies: Challenges and Opportunities*. The growing influence of digital technologies and the implementation of digital tools by media scholars was one of the main themes at the conference. In my own research, I have often drawn upon my undergraduate degree in economics and mathematics, adopting a political economy approach and often employing Excel sheets, building charts and graphs in order to make sense of data. In my studies on the Turkish media industry, like other scholars interested in production studies, I made use of tools long developed in anthropology, such as participant observation or auto-ethnography. More recently, for a new project on audience perception in cinematic VR, I have brought together a team that includes a psychology scholar and a computer scientist. It has been both a challenge and a delight to navigate each participant's approach and discourse, deciphering how the same word might hold different meanings for each of us. Collaborating closely with a colleague from another discipline is like learning a whole new language, and we have a saying in Turkish that I always stand by: 'One who speaks only one language is one person, but one who speaks two languages is two people.' (It sounds much better in Turkish, which proves my point!)

Finally, I will turn to generative texts / concepts / practices, and once again sing praises of collaborations – but this time with the media industries. This, of course, is a slippery area. Anyone who has written a grant application and had to come up with ways to 'exploit' their research findings may have felt like they might possibly be pandering to the powerful media corporations. But looking at media content without taking into consideration conditions of production leads us to see only a tiny part of the picture. Clearly, this field is not understudied, but there is still room to grow. Partnerships with the producers and creators of media also have the potential to shape what is being produced, possibly nudging the industry towards a more equal representation. This has been especially observable in matters of gender representation, where networks like EWA (European Women's Audiovisual Network) bring together industry members and researchers to create concrete changes in the industry. Working closely with the industry can also help provide smaller players in the field, who may have gone unnoticed otherwise, with a

deserved visibility. But it is only if academics maintain their inquisitive, independent, and sovereign nature that these kinds of alliances can remain valid, without risking conflicts of interest. In conclusion, I remain divided. While these may be hard times overall for academics, it is a productive and exciting time to be a media scholar. Yes, the doctors are in.

Author

Melis Behlil is an Associate Professor of Cinema Studies and Chair of Radio, Television and Cinema Department at Kadir Has University in Istanbul, Turkey. She also writes film reviews for various publications, co-hosts a weekly radio show, and is a member of the Turkish Film Critics Association.

Notes

- [1] For more information about the petition as well as statistics on the trials, please see <https://barisicinakademiyeuler.net/English>.