Early career researchers must move beyond silences and anonymity in policy debate

Alertly present and unencumbered by the weight of bureaucracy and institutional history, early career researchers can offer productively critical viewpoints on institutions of higher learning. They should comment publicly and eschew anonymity when they do.

The Guardian’s Early Career Researchers platform frequently carries bold posts. Three recent pieces possess characteristic punch and timeliness: ‘Stick or Twist: the postdoctoral dilemma,’ ‘The truth of the academic job hunt – even one with a happy ending,’ and ‘PhD: so what does it really stand for?’ The trio is arresting, particularly in the British context, where the scale and pace of debate surrounding recent opinion pieces by early career researchers in US publications leave us in wide-eyed wonderment.

The welcome audacity of these three posts sits, however, in uneasy contrast with the coyness of their authors, who have published under cloak of anonymity. One byline notes only that the nameless author is a post-doctoral researcher in Italy. Another states that anonymity has allowed the writer ‘freedom to comment upon the challenges faced by early career researchers, without damaging their own job prospects.’ The writers apparently feel unable to sign their criticisms because they are not yet there (wherever it might be) and, unprotected by namelessness, they fear that they might never get there.

As a doctoral candidate, I have some sympathy with this choice of anonymity. I have written articles on the academic pay scale, women in university leadership and PhD funding. These pieces remain safely filed away in the far corners of my laptop, a truth painfully ironic given that I study (Argentine) public debate and am acutely aware of the perils of self-censorship, pared-down spaces of public conversation and elite-dominated national debate. But how do we publicly challenge institutional orthodoxies or propose improvements to organizations from which we might one day seek employment? What might the career consequences be? And should we, anyway, when we are not yet there?

Any profession or industry has its flaws, and those imperfections have a habit of revealing themselves most clearly to those relatively new to it. No longer wholly outside but not yet securely inside either, new entrants may offer valuable insights because they are at once alertly present and unencumbered by the - sometimes heavy - weight of bureaucracy and institutional history. This liminality can enlighten.

Yet, challenges exist. Being not yet there is, apart from anything else, a state of anticipation: waiting for a certain kind of legitimacy, greater intellectual confidence and financial surety. The anticipation of a more secure personal future makes commenting from anonymity an attractive proposition. We can apparently contribute to the discussion of institutions and mitigate the risk of those opinions damaging our chances of joining one.

The problem with this apparent ‘best of both worlds’ approach is that if anonymous policy comment underpins our shared state of anticipation, we surely await a future in which anonymity has already sedimented as a legitimate - perhaps necessary - condition for debating institutions. And that does not spell a better collective future.

This is not the (perhaps) humble anonymity of philanthropy but the fear-driven type of Enlightenment sedition. The pre-history that we are currently making - in which potential future thought-leaders underpin their debate with trepidation – is, then, disquieting. The principal fear is surely employment-related. Academic institutions may be centres of critique, but it is difficult to imagine their placing top of job lists, at least without pausing for thought,
If this kind of institutional backlash is difficult to trace and hopefully an inaccurate perception, the anonymous Guardian submissions make evident ‘a feeling’ of its truth among early career researchers. The anaemic body of early career researchers contributing to higher education policy debate suggests that a critical mass share this anxiety. It hints at self-censorship among the youngest generation of a profession that tasks itself with driving ideas and change-making conversation. The feeling, then, must not be ignored.

Other fears may also come into play. We risk accusation of holding youthful fancies or impatiently putting our academic pubescence on public display. We might fear presenting openly an argument that turns out to reap little backing - revealing our outsider status in embarrassingly public form. Anonymity enticingly appears to dissolve this last anxiety, for it seems to afford the writer powers of collective representation. Readers can, inaccurately, transform the nameless writer from individual thinker into ‘the’ early career researcher or, as Pascal Junod recently lamented, erroneously take an incognito commentator as envoy of the multitude.

Public silences and namelessness are both always new and already, many times over, history. We are irrevocably intimate with their implications, chief among them failure to take seriously (if at all) the ideas of the full diversity of the population, and the writing out of voices. Poor voices. The voices of ‘Half the Sky.’ When feminist post-colonial scholarship emerged as a discursive effect that could disrupt ‘the master narratives of western culture,’ it sought to reclaim a vocalness denied through silences and anonymities. These family resemblances beg the question: must an intentional ‘scholarship of the not-yet-there’ emerge for the voices of those early in their career to gain legitimacy and listeners in public institutional debate? Its necessity would be lamentable but a pro-active method, bubbling with forward-looking thought, may be no bad thing.

‘Are we there yet?’ is a question familiar to anyone who took a family road trip as a child. Asked insistently enough, it would elicit a silencing if spluttering juice box or fun-for-five-minutes car game. ‘Be patient!’ we might be told. Or, the white lie - ‘we’re not too far, now.’ Those trips taught us patience, or that we were not patient. Later, experience revealed that patience is not always a virtue, despite the values that a western education had attempted to inculcate in us.

Experience should here be our guide, pushing us to eschew waiting patiently, silently, anonymously for what might come and to open ourselves, instead, to the risks that putting into the world, with our names, texts that critique institutions can engender. Whatever the uncertainties, we will surely then delegitimize, not just in theory but also through practice, the fear-based anonymity now emerging as a dangerously accepted condition for institutional debate.

Signing our opinions before we are there - unsure whether we will ever get there - signals an encouragingly optimistic pre-history to an unknown future; a method of creating an imminent public forum in which scholars can productively critique, their names and faces revealed, the institutions that apparently, hopefully make critics of us.

And that is the kind of future to which I, at least, would like to belong.