



professors, we (still) need you!

by amin ghaziani

Nearly a decade ago, *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof issued a challenge in a piece titled, “Professors, We Need You!” In it, he urged American academics out of their ivory towers and into public and policy debates. In those domains, he believed, there was far too little informed expertise, while all the big ideas and ambitious research were hidden away in obscure journals, obtuse papers, and the cloistered minds of those who stubbornly refused to speak the relevant facts, loud and clear, to the wider world. Catching up with Kristof, we were thrilled that he promoted the relevance of sociology to current social issues. Still, he told *Contexts* co-editor Amin Ghaziani that similar roadblocks sadly continue to keep the best of our facts and findings from reaching desks like his. To truly heed Kristof’s call will require individual ingenuity in partnership with institutional change—in other words, an imaginative sociological response to an urgent need for public engagement.



Nicholas Kristof

Courtesy New York Times

AMIN GHAZIANI: We’ve long read your work, and we were really struck—in a lasting way—by your 2014 column calling out professors. Do you remember what compelled you to directly appeal to academics?

NICHOLAS KRISTOF: The Iraq War was the start of it, and then, looking at issues like incarceration, drug policy, and homelessness, it seemed as if so much of policymaking and news coverage—my world—was oblivious to some really important research. And my take is that, over the last 20 years or so, the research has gotten a lot better. There have been more randomized controlled trials, more really rigorous research, and that hasn’t reached policymakers. Often, you hear policymakers expound and believe in things that the best evidence suggests are not true!

So, I wrote that essay. It was partly a call to professors to try to contribute more to that discussion, partly a call to those of us who do have megaphones to cite professors more, [and] an institutional call to universities to try to reward professors who do contribute

to those public debates. I think one of my concerns is that a lot of universities, while they’re great public goods, don’t reward professors as if that were true and are suspicious of op-eds, for example, or television appearances, rather than rewarding those professors who contribute in that way.

AG: What can academics bring to the conversation that no one else can?

NK: There’s a lot of good research about what works and what doesn’t work. For example, we have states and the federal government that are making drug policy, and it’s quite poorly informed by the experience of other countries around the world, whether—frankly, Vancouver, B.C. has done some really interesting things with drug policy—and those lessons haven’t filtered into the public consciousness. Here in the United States, we lost more than 107,000 people last year from overdoses! *A hundred and seven thousand people*. It’s staggering.

I think we would make better policy if we had better evidence—and

professors compile that evidence. They know that research. Often, they disguise it beneath heaps of equations so that it seems to be written in a Cyrillic alphabet or something, but lives would be saved, people would live better, and policy would be more effective if we drew on evidence that scholars have developed rather than just the hunches of policymakers.

AG: Drug policy is an interesting example, because it’s a multidisciplinary enterprise. Sociologists are working on it. Economists are working on it. Policy researchers are working on it. What do you think is the sociologist’s role in this conversation?

NK: I do think that sociology has been underrepresented in policy debates, and that economists have been the imperialists of the academic world and invaded the space of social psychology, sociology, and the social sciences. I think that may be true for a couple of reasons. I’m thinking out loud here, but I think that it has been more acceptable in the discipline of economics for professors to wade into public debates, to be public

intellectuals. There's a long tradition of great economists working in the White House, speaking very publicly, [and] going to the Fed.

Secondly, economics is unusual in that it is more centrist than most academic disciplines, and I'd say sociology is more leftist than most disciplines. One result is that the debate in economics is closer to the political center in the United States, and that gives policymakers more confidence in economists. It means that the debate is closer to where the public debate is rather than well to the left of it. To me—I'm sure a lot of your readers will disagree—but to me, one of the lessons is that there really is a benefit to a discipline recruiting conservatives and conservative voices, that they actually may give a discipline more impact on public policy rather than less.

AG: It really hit home when you called on academics to get in the game. Do you think we've come through?

NK: I think there's been real progress—more by individual scholars than by universities as institutions. I think that there have been more efforts to translate scholarship into plain English and to reach journalists, to reach policymakers. Harvard had a really very useful newsletter that they were sending out to journalists that, you know, "if you're going to be writing about COVID-19, [for example,] here's recent research. If you're going to be writing about incarceration, here's the best research on that." That was—I found those incredibly useful. Yet, I think there's still enormous room for greater influence from scholars. My perception is that universities still roll their eyes. They want scholars to devote almost all their time to writing much more abstruse work. I think academic writing still often

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I'm struck that, very often when scholars do go on TV, it's because they published a book recently. Their publisher is trying to make sales, and so is arranging for them to get on TV to talk about it. I wish that universities did more of a similar outreach, simply to weigh in on matters of public discussion, so that a university press person would call up a TV producer and say, "I see you're reporting a lot about homelessness now. We have a sociologist on faculty who's been writing about this for 20 years, knows more about it than anybody else. Do you want to have them on air?" I don't think that universities are as pro-active in

propelling those voices to the public as they might be.

AG: You have a variety of interests that motivate your work, and you're keenly interested in connecting with researchers. How do we professors get on your radar?

NK: It's really catch as catch can. It's not very systematized! But I love academic research. Periodically on Twitter—I follow a bunch of scholars—and periodically somebody will tweet some study that may be a little bit obscure, but that I find particularly interesting. Occasionally, I prowl the National Bureau of Economic Research website, which has some interesting studies. People reach out to me, people who I've interviewed for example.

And, if I'm going to be writing about x topic, then I will google it and see if I can come across things—but the problem is that, very often, if you google a topic, then you get a bunch of trash! You know, most widely read rather than the best evidence, the best work.

AG: So, we must find a way to rise above the noise to ensure that writers like you can find the best available social scientific work. Are there a couple strategies you can recommend to *Contexts* readers and contributors with an interest in reaching writers like you?

NK: I would suggest a few things. One is public relations. If you've got a good

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study on some topic, and if it's possible to send out embargoed copies, then a week before it's going to be released, try to contact some reporters in that field—and enclose the study or a .pdf, [especially] if it's behind a paywall. In most cases, people aren't going to write about it, but it's pretty easily done, and it's worth trying.

I'd likewise think that it would be good if either departments or universities did reach out more or try to get professors on the radar of writers or TV producers. Especially when an issue is in the news—Iran, right now, as we're speaking, Iran is very much in the news, and my guess is that TV producers are very eager to find experts on Iran, on young Iranians, on gender in Iran—but the producers,

they don't know who those people are. If a university reached out and said, "We have this area specialist," that would be great. Or guns. There's going to be another mass shooting, somewhere here in the United States, sometime soon. And when that happens, reporters, TV producers are going to be desperate for

lowest abortion rate is not one that bans abortion; it's the Netherlands, because it has very good, comprehensive sex education and very good access to contraceptives. And, as a result, the abortion rate is the lowest. That's a really important lesson for policymakers in this country.

I think a lot of American policy-

AG: Are there any last comments you'd like to offer our readers about the public relevance of the work that professors do?

NK: I'm very much shaped by the experience of the community that I grew up in, where I am now, which is a blue-collar community which has been devastated by drugs, alcohol, and suicide. In trying to understand what went wrong here, I've learned a huge amount from the work of William Julius Wilson, the importance of work, and for that matter, in many ways, the importance of family structure. There are so many people who have really influenced my perceptions, and yet it feels as if there is this island with all this wealth of knowledge, practical knowledge, and then we have policymaking and news coverage—and there aren't enough bridges. Thank you for your work in helping build one more bridge. As it was 10 years ago, it's still true today: Professors, we need you!

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Nicholas Kristof is a columnist for *The New York Times* who has won two Pulitzer Prizes, an Emmy, and other awards such as the Anne Frank Award and the Dayton Literary Peace Prize. He is the author, most recently, of *Tightrope*.

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gun policy experts. Rather than sitting in one's office and waiting for the phone to ring, it'd be great if universities were more proactive and tried to reach out, even just on Twitter, "Here's a study that one of our professors did about gun violence." Or calling up news organizations and offering that professor. Sadly, gun massacres are going to be something that are going to be happening again and again, so one can prepare to get that ready for when it happens so the people weighing in aren't just think-tank "hired guns," so to speak, but actual people with the best scholarship.

AG: We know that one key challenge that confronts journalists is curating voices. How do you bring international perspectives to your pages? Do researchers outside the United States have the same ability to inform policy and public life through the media?

NK: In the United States, we largely fail at that. But I think there are incredibly important lessons from other countries in policymaking, and so we should look at foreign studies. I've learned, myself, an awful lot from the experience of other countries.

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makers are worried that if they provide unemployment benefits and other social safety net benefits, then people will not work. So, it's really important to know that countries like Denmark have a higher labor participation rate, especially for prime-age workers, than the United States does.

At M.I.T., the Poverty Action Lab has done a lot of really good studies about fighting poverty in other countries that, I think, can illuminate the situation here in the United States. There were important studies in India about what happened when women became village chiefs. It was done randomly, and those villages that randomly had a female leader turned out to be, in many ways, better run than other villages—and yet the villagers didn't think so. It was a fascinating example of how improvements in conditions aren't always appreciated the first time around. But after this had happened in one cycle, then people did seem to judge female leaders more objectively.

So, I do think that there's an awful lot that we can learn from other countries, and I try to look out for that research and those studies, but if it's catch as catch can with U.S. research, then I'd say it's moreso with overseas research.