Geographers in the public square: A comparative analysis of op-ed productivity

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A B S T R A C T

This paper explores three questions. 1) How active are academics in the op-ed pages of American newspapers and how do geographers compare on this front? 2) Are there patterns that emerge among those geographers who have published commentaries in American newspapers in terms of their rank and gender? 3) Are there common themes or perspectives which emerge in the opinion pieces penned by geographers? These questions are answered by an analysis of newspaper op-eds published in the United States over the 2004–2008 period using the LexisNexis Academic database. Geography ranks sixth out of the seven disciplines measured in terms of the total number of op-eds published, yet fourth out of seven when the different sizes of disciplines are taken into account. Within geography, authors with the rank of full professor are the most likely to publish a commentary.

Introduction

There is a general concern in the American academy today that there are insufficient numbers of public intellectuals in society (e.g., Jacoby, 2000; Michael, 2000; Small, 2002; Posner, 2003). Public intellectuals are often academics or writers with particular expertise who regularly address issues of broad interest in the media. Posner (2003: 3) has defined public intellectuals as “intellectuals who opine to an educated public on questions of, or infl ected by, political or ideological concern.” As such, these are essentially individuals who take the time to address an important public debate when they have a valuable and well supported perspective to add to the conversation. Public intellectuals may be distinguished from social commentators (such as newspaper columnists) who regularly write on a broad range of issues on which they may or may not have any particular expertise; as well as from thought leaders who are generators of new ideas in a particular field (Klavans & Boyack, 2008). Our assertion, which is shared by many, is that society benefits when its public discourse is enlivened and enriched by a diverse and informed set of perspectives and that public intellectuals are key actors in this process.

This same concern about a paucity of public intellectuals is shared by some in geography who perceive the field to be far behind other disciplines in terms of public scholarship (Alderman, 2004; Mitchell, 2006; Murphy, 2003, 2006; Murphy, de Blij, Turner, Gilmore, & Gregory, 2005). As Murphy (2006: 1) has noted: “[s]erious newspapers are suffused with the writings of economists and political scientists, but commentaries by geographers are rare.” In contrast, Castree (2006) describes the rise of a number of public intellectuals working in the radical geography tradition, including David Harvey, Neil Smith and Michael Watts. However, to be clear, Murphy is discussing engagement with the public via op-ed writing whereas Castree is describing geographers who are reaching out to broader audiences via other means, such as books and film. Other prominent public intellectuals within geography might include Jared Diamond for his best selling books (Guns, Germs and Steel (1997))

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and *Collapse (2005)*), Harm de Blij for his appearances on ABC-TV’s *Good Morning America*, or Diana Liverman for her work on public commissions (e.g., NAS Committee on America’s Climate Choices; testimony to Senate Commerce Committee on Climate Change; UK Human Dimensions of Global Environmental Change Committee). Are these prominent examples of public intellectuals indicative of a healthy culture of public engagement within geography or are these isolated exceptions to a norm of little to no engagement? Measuring how geography compares to other disciplines in terms of its engagement with the public media is important for understanding whether or not the field is underperforming on this front (or, stated differently, contributing its fair share to important public debates of the day).

A key argument in support of public scholarship is that it enlivens and enriches the civic debate on a particular topic by ensuring that those with relevant expertise join the conversation. Again, from the perspective of a geographer, Murphy (2006: 3) has argued, “that our understanding of issues and problems will be impoverished if geographical perspectives are not part of the mix.” Others assert that academics have an ethical obligation to engage in public scholarship where appropriate (Garrison, 1995; Jacoby, 2000; Jones, 1995; Moseley, 2010; Pollack, 1995, Said, 1995). Mitchell (2006: 205), paraphrasing Karl Marx, asserts “that the point of scholarship…is not just to interpret the world but to change it.”

There are a number of constraints on the production of public scholarship by American academics today. For starters, most U.S. tenure and promotion systems grant little weight to any form of public scholarship. As such, a scholar’s commitment to this type of outreach often is not supported by professional incentive systems (Moseley, 2010). Secondly, public expressions of informed opinion, via the op-eds pages or others media outlets, may expose academics to increased scrutiny or backlash from the public or elected officials. There were a number of troubling cases along these lines in the wake of 9/11 (Mitchell, 2006). Thirdly, commentaries are actually quite difficult to publish in leading newspaper outlets. Not only must they be extremely well-crafted and written in a very different style than is typical for academics, but the timing of submissions typically must jibe with the news cycle (Moseley, 2010). Finally, the range of views aired in mainstream newspaper outlets is often narrow enough that many perspectives may not receive fair consideration by editors (Mitchell, 2006).

Public engagement by scholars may be categorized in at least three ways: 1) designing research to address pre-defined problems (scholarship for public policy); 2) working with communities to define and address problems (organic public scholarship); and 3) participating in the framing of societal issues and questions through interaction with the popular media and press (traditional public scholarship) (Ward, 2005, 2006). This paper focuses on the later concern, traditional public scholarship, through an examination of a particular form of this type of writing in the United States, the newspaper op-ed (or commentary or opinion piece). There are clearly many other forms of traditional public scholarship, such as TV and radio interviews, blogs, magazine articles, and broadly accessible books. We have, however, chosen to focus on the newspaper op-ed or commentary as it is still (despite the rise of various forms of new media) one of the most widely read and recognizable forms of public scholarship. It is also one of the easier forms of public scholarship to analyze as newspapers commentaries are collected and categorized in databases such as LexisNexis.

Newspaper op-eds, so-called because they first appeared opposite the editorial page, were an innovation in 1921 by the then editor of the *New York Evening World*, Herbert Bayer Swope (Meyer, 1990). Unlike newspaper editorials, which are unsigned and penned by members of the editorial board, or opinion pieces written by salaried newspaper columnists, op-eds feature the views of named members of the community with particular expertise on the topic at hand. In addition to TV, radio or Internet commentaries, newspaper op-eds are one of the major outlets by which academics may share their views with the public on important societal questions.

How then are geographers faring in terms of public scholarship? While there is concern that geographers are not sufficiently active in the op-ed pages of contemporary newspapers, this question has yet to be analyzed empirically. As such, this paper aims to explore three simple questions. First, how active are academics (from seven different disciplines) in the op-ed pages of American newspapers and how do geographers compare on this front? Second, are there patterns that emerge among those geographers who have published commentaries in American newspapers over the past five years in terms of their rank and gender? While gender and rank are only two of many possible categories we could have explored, the accessibility of this type of information made these categories easier to analyze. Finally, are there any common themes or perspectives which repeatedly emerge in the opinion pieces penned by geographers?

**Methodology**

In order to answer these research questions, we examined op-eds published in U.S. newspapers over a five year period, from January 1, 2004 to December 31, 2008, using the LexisNexis Academic database. We searched the LexisNexis “US Periodicals and Wires” collection, which includes 547 publications.1 As these 547 publications included several trade and professional newsletters, we further limited the field to 250 publications which clearly could be defined as newspapers, including weeklies and dailies. These newspapers ranged from those located in small towns (e.g., *The Bismarck Tribune* and *Bangor Daily News*), to medium sized cities (e.g., *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* and *Richmond Times Dispatch*) to large urban markets (e.g., *Los Angeles Times* and *Chicago Tribune*). We limited our analysis of op-ed authors to those associated with geography and six other allied disciplines (Anthropology, Biology, Economics, Geology, Political Science, and Sociology) chosen for their close affiliation with certain dimensions of human or physical geography.

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1 A summary list of these publications may be viewed at: http://academic.lexisnexis.com/online-services/academic-content-news.aspx.

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A standardized Boolean search (using “and,” “or,” etc.) was used to identify opinion pieces written by academics and professionals in the aforementioned disciplines. Each article found in these searches was scanned individually and tagged if it met any of the following criteria: written by an academic; the author self-identified as a professional in a relevant discipline; or the author was mentioned to hold a degree in an applicable discipline. The list was then narrowed to eliminate duplicates (since many articles are re-printed in other periodicals), letters to the editor (usually shorter pieces responding to previously published articles), and commentaries by regular or syndicated columnists.

In order to standardize op-ed productivity across disciplines, we estimated the size of each academic field in the United States. While membership data is available from relevant professional organizations, using this information to estimate the size of disciplines is difficult for those fields with multiple professional organizations (such as political science or biology). While acknowledging that such a measure is not perfect, we ultimately chose the number of PhDs granted by U.S. institutions between 1968 and 2006 as the best approximate measure of discipline size. The number of geography PhDs granted per annum, and the gender of PhD recipients, was obtained from the Association of American Geographers (AAG, 2009). For the other six disciplines, this data was gathered from the Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED), published annually by the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

For the opinion pieces found to have been written by geographers, information regarding the gender and academic rank of the author (current to when the piece was published) was also gathered. For most articles, this information was available in the text of the opinion piece. For the remaining articles, official biographies or curriculum vitae were examined for such detail.

The content analysis of geography op-eds was entirely qualitative in nature. The number of such articles was small enough (57), and their length sufficiently short, that they simply could be read to get a sense for common themes and perspectives.

The articles collected for analysis in this paper should be interpreted as a representative sample of op-ed output for the various disciplines rather than a comprehensive assessment. Due to copyright issues, many newspapers and periodicals do not report their op-eds to LexisNexis. This relates back to the 2001 “Tasini Decision,” in which the U.S. Supreme Court declared the right of freelance writers to separate compensation for the online publishing of their work.

### Results and discussion

In terms of total op-eds published in American newspapers, political scientists and economists published by far the highest number of these with 709 and 700 respectively over the 2004–2008 period, collectively accounting for 71% of all of the op-eds published by the seven disciplines measured in this study (Table 1). Even when the relatively large size of these two disciplines was taken into consideration (in terms of number of PhDs granted in the United States since 1968), average op-eds published per PhD was also the highest for these two fields. Total commentaries published then dropped to 255 for sociology (13% of total op-eds), 133 for biology (7% of total), 99 for anthropology (5% of total), 57 for geography (3% of total), and 39 for geology (2% of total). However, the ranking of these last five disciplines changes when their different sizes are taken into account. In terms of average op-eds per PhD, sociology is 3rd, followed by geography (4th), anthropology (5th), geology (6th) and biology (7th).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Total op-eds (2004–2008)</th>
<th>% Total</th>
<th>Rank total op-eds</th>
<th>Total PhDs (1968–2006)</th>
<th>Avg op-eds per PhD</th>
<th>Rank avg op-eds per PhD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political Science</td>
<td>709</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>32,015</td>
<td>0.022145869</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40,151</td>
<td>0.017434186</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21,887</td>
<td>0.011650752</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6185</td>
<td>0.009215845</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthropology</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15,403</td>
<td>0.006427319</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geology</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16,473</td>
<td>0.00236751</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>174,431</td>
<td>0.00762479</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2 Articles were identified that contained the words “editorial”, “commentary”, “op ed”, “op-ed”, “oped”, “opinion”, “opinions”, “perspective”, “voices”, “forum”, “point/counterpoint” in the “section” portion of their metadata. Of these, articles were identified if the name of the discipline and the word for a professional in that discipline (“geography” and “geographer”, for example) appeared in the “byline” section of their metadata; if the name of the discipline appeared in a sentence of the body of the article with the words “degree”, “department”, “professor”, or “teaches”; or if the singular form of a professional in that discipline appeared at any point in the body of the article (“a geographer”, for example).

3 The most obvious problems with this measure include: many who earned their PhD in the United States subsequently leave to work in another country; and (2) many US-based academics earn their PhDs abroad.

4 Our assumption is that most academics who earn their PhD before 1968 would now be retired. The most recent year for which data is available is 2006.

5 It is important to note that Anthropology, Biology, Economics, Political Science, and Sociology all have their own categories in the SED database. Geology is included in the broader category of Earth Sciences. Geology’s earned doctorate data, as part of the “Earth Sciences” category, also includes geochemistry, geology, geomorphology and glacial geology, geophysics and seismology, mineralogy and petrology, paleontology, stratigraphy and sedimentation, and geological and earth sciences.
These results confirm that geography lags far behind comparable disciplines in the United States in terms of total opinion pieces published between 2004 and 2008 (ranking six out of seven fields). However, this trailing position is, in part, explained by the fact that geography is by far the smallest of the seven disciplines measured (the next smallest discipline – anthropology – is over two times as large). When geography’s small size is taken into account, it ranks fourth in terms of average productivity (op-eds per PhD). It is interesting to note that all three of the disciplines ahead of geography are in the social sciences whereas two of the three disciplines behind geography are in the natural sciences. Perhaps geography’s embrace of the science model (Turner, 2002), and the desire of many scientists to appear politically neutral, has led geography to be less publicly engaged?

How then does commentary productivity vary within the discipline of geography by rank and gender? The results in Table 2 show that full professors are the most active, penning 47.4% of geography’s op-eds between 2004 and 2008, followed by instructors (15.8%), associate professors (14%), non-academic geographers (12.3%) and assistant professors (10.5%). Given the incentive structure within academia, which discourages public scholarship until after tenure, it is not surprising that full professors were the most prolific op-ed writers and assistant professors the least. Perhaps most curious is the position of instructors (including non-tenure track and adjunct professors, as well geographers who are primary and secondary school teachers) who rank second as op-ed writers. Again, perhaps it is the lack of tenure or promotion pressure which frees these individuals to engage in more public scholarship?

In terms of gender, over 84% of geography’s op-eds were penned by male geographers (Table 3). However, this statistic must be understood within the gender structure of academic geography. Nearly 77% of U.S. geography PhDs earned between 1968 and 2006 were by men, leaving the discipline still largely male dominated. However, the proportion of women garnering geography PhDs per annum has gained steadily over the decades, from 10% in the 1970s, to 23% in the 1980s, to 29% in the 1990s, to 37% in the 2000s (AAG, 2009). Given that female participation is much more significant amongst more recent PhD cohorts, it seems fair to assume that the full professor rank – the category most likely to write op-eds – is even more overwhelmingly male than the rest of the discipline. As such, the disproportionately male authorship of geography op-eds is mostly likely an artifact of the structure of U.S. geography.

Geographers are writing about a broad array of themes in their commentaries, from the Iraq War, to fire hazards, to the social dimensions of GPS technology. This range should come as no surprise given the breadth of geography. However, certain prominent themes within the discipline with clear public interest reappear most frequently in its opinion pieces, such as climate and environmental change, natural disasters, food and agriculture, geospatial technologies, immigration and US foreign policy. Some common perspectives or approaches also emerge in many of the op-eds by geographers. One such approach is to connect patterns or phenomenon in one part of the world to processes at a broader scale or in another part of the world (e.g., Diamond, 2008; Moseley, 2008; Muldavin, 2007). For example, in “China’s not alone in environmental crisis,” Joshua Muldavin (2007) connects U.S. consumption of cheap imported manufactured goods to China’s greenhouse gas emissions. Another common theme is to critically comment on the use or misuse of geospatial technologies (e.g., Dobson, 2005; Eastman, 2007; MacPherson, 2006). In “Human Tracking: Big Brother Goes Mainstream,” Jerome Dobson (2005) raises a number of concerns and critical issues related to human tracking devices. Finally, one other major perspective is to highlight how natural disasters are, in fact, not natural but the product of development patterns and social organization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Geography’s op-ed productivity by rank (2004–2008).</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic rank</td>
<td>Op-eds (2004–2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography Instructor (non-tenure track, primary, secondary, adjunct)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Professor</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate Professor</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor (emeritus and full professor)</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-academic</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total op-ed</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Source: LexisNexis Academic.

**Table 3**


<table>
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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Geography Op-eds (2004–2008)*</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Op-eds by female geographers</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Op-eds by male geographers</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female geography PhDs (1968–2006)b</td>
<td>1423</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male geography PhDs (1968–2006)b</td>
<td>4762</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography PhDs (1968–2006)b</td>
<td>6185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Op-eds per female geography PhD</td>
<td>0.006324666</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Op-eds per male geography PhD</td>
<td>0.010079798</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Op-eds per geography PhD</td>
<td>0.009215845</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Source: LexisNexis Academic.

(e.g., Colten, 2005; Jarosz, 2008; Meek, 2006). For example, in “Increase Diversity of Grain Supplies,” Lucy Jarosz (2008) discussed how global food insecurity in 2008 was not a result of underproduction or bad weather, but an overreliance on the energy intensive production of a few key grains.

**Conclusion**

The findings reported in this commentary confirm the conventional wisdom that geography lags behind comparable disciplines in terms of the total number of op-eds published in US newspapers in recent years (ranking sixth out of seven disciplines analyzed). However, when geography’s small size is taken into account, it ranks fourth out of the seven disciplines in terms of op-eds per PhD (outpacing anthropology, geology and biology). The finding that geography’s full professors are the most active commentary writers is also not surprising given the various disincentives to be an active public scholar until after receiving tenure.

What then are geographers to make of the findings presented in this commentary? The results confirm the dominance of certain disciplines in American public discourse and policy discussions, namely political science and economics. Clearly, part of the problem is on the receiving end (having editors who are open to publishing the views of geographers). But geography could also be more aggressive about its commitment to public scholarship. Here, the example of another relatively small discipline, sociology, may be instructive. On a per PhD basis, sociologists publish about 26% more op-eds than do geographers. Like geography, sociology had a president of its major professional association (Michael Burawoy) who took public scholarship very seriously and used the weight of his office to encourage it (Burawoy, 2004, 2005a, 2005b). As such, it may be that sociologists are simply less reticent to comment on political questions. While geography’s embrace of the science paradigm may allow the discipline to exert its influence within certain key institutions, such as the National Academy of Sciences (Turner, 2002), it should also not be afraid to be active in public fora.

Like Murphy (2003, 2006), we would argue that many public discussions could be enriched if geographic perspectives were a part of the mix. In areas where geographers have been active public scholars, such as on the themes of natural disasters, critical perspectives on geospatial technologies, or food and environmental policy, the field has made important contributions to the public debate (Murray & Tong, 2009).

It would be difficult to conclude this essay without at least mentioning the decline of the US newspaper industry and newspaper readership more broadly. In 2004, just over half of Americans read the newspaper on a daily basis (and newspaper readers were older, more white and more affluent than the general population) (Hilt & Lipschultz, 2005; Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2004). But the decline of the newspaper in American society does not necessarily signal the demise of the opinion piece. In fact, many would argue that the online world is an even more favorable environment for well-formatted and pithy opinion essays. While the method of delivery may change, a space for public discourse will persist, and geographers ought to be active participants in such discussions.

**References**


