



## Rethinking and Remaking Academic Freedom

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Also published in *Missing Pieces IV: An Alternative Guide To Canadian Post-secondary Education*.  
Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

The following talk was prepared for a session on academic freedom and the special challenges in the sciences that was part of a discussion series organized by a concerned group of faculty with support from the University of Saskatchewan Faculty Association in the Spring of 2002. The session was inspired by the particular experience of Dr. Nancy Olivieri at the Hospital for Sick Children as well as the general growth in the number of research linkages between corporations and academics. The set up, title, and reflection questions for the session catalyzed an unexpected shift in my thinking about the current state of university/industry links. Rather than focusing only on the problems inherent in these links, I turned my attention to the new discourse about these links, and how it is itself becoming part of these problems. The text of the presentation is reproduced below.

What I would like to address today are not simply the problems that are produced for the sciences (and other academic areas) by university/industry research links. I also want to address how we have started **talking about** the problems caused by university/industry links, particularly since the Olivieri case, and how we are proposing to resolve them. Without attributing intention or blame, it seems to me that a new framework for looking at this issue is being put into place, one that is built around a particular conception of academic freedom. And although this reframing of the problem is very enticing, particularly to academics, I will argue that neither it, nor the strategies that flow from it, serve the needs and interests of academics, universities, or the general public. In what follows, I will discuss the nature of this new framework, how it works, why it is problematic, and how we should respond to it.

To set up the discussion, however, I will first talk briefly about the conception of framing that informs my analysis and then spend some time on the general problem that I see being reframed.

The conception of framing that I use in this paper draws loosely on the work of Canadian sociologist Dorothy Smith (1990, 1999). Smith suggests that one way in which people in our society are ruled is through the use of ideologies— or frameworks— that enable those in power to reconstruct people's experiences in ways that render them more amenable to management. This is accomplished by producing accounts of people's experience in which only certain aspects or particulars of their experience are represented, and in which the connectives or intrinsic links among these particulars are severed and sometimes reformulated. The effect of this narrowing and reorganizing of people's experiences is that they become subject to alternative interpretations, which then require and legitimize different forms of intervention. According to Smith, these forms of interpretation and intervention generally serve the needs of those doing the ruling, rather than those who are ruled.

One example Smith provides to illustrate this process involves two letters that describe a confrontation between the police and street people in Berkeley in 1968 (Smith, 1999, pp. 50-51). In the first, a witness describes in detail how the police roughly searched a young man who was then sent on up the street. This event is offered as evidence that the police were trying to provoke a reaction from the crowd that would justify harassing and arresting them. The second letter, which is issued from the mayor's office after an internal investigation of the event, provides a reformulation of the first. It extracts

only certain particulars from the event and inserts new connectives between them. It tells us that the young man was a juvenile who was already known to the police. The letter also notes that he was later arrested and pleaded guilty to the charge of being a minor in possession of alcoholic beverages. The effect of the mayor's letter is to reframe the event and to instruct the reader to understand it in a very different way. Rather than harassing innocent victims, the police were identifying and redressing a crime. Hence, rather than protesting police provocation as did our misguided witness, we should rest assured that the police force is doing its work responsibly and competently. Below, I will suggest that an analogous (though not identical) form of reframing is taking place with respect to our understanding of the problems inherent in university/industry research links. Before I discuss how our conception of the problems is being reframed, however, I need to talk about the problems themselves.

Both my own research and that of others on university/ industry links suggests that these links contribute to very significant transformations in what our universities do and in what our universities are<sup>1</sup>. Perhaps the most obvious impact of these links relates to knowledge production in the university. In both direct and indirect ways, these links transform the selection and conception of academic research projects, skewing the academic research agenda towards areas of industrial application and economic relevance. University/industry research links also transform the execution of academic research

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<sup>1</sup> The sources on which the following claims are based are too numerous to note here. They are substantiated in my own published work, as well as the work of other Canadian academics such as Janice Newson, Neil Tudiver, and the many contributors to the CCPA's Education Project. These claims are further supported by the research and publications of national organizations such as the Canadian Association of University Teachers and the Canadian Federation of Students as well as the work of academics in other countries, such as Sheila Slaughter, Larry Leslie, and Lawrence Soley from the United States.

by introducing new norms, practices, and exigencies into the research process, such as increased secrecy and competition in research, or the need to work with shorter time lines and an eye to profitability. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, corporate links transform the ways in which and conditions under which academic research is used. Rather than a public good that is freely shared with all who can use it, university research is increasingly being privatized and commercialized and thus rendered accessible only to those who can afford to pay to use it.

In addition to its knowledge production function, corporate links also produce and reinforce changes in the more general nature and operations of the university. Indeed, the more universities work with business, the more they are required and encouraged to adopt values and practices that predominate in the private sector. This shift is perhaps most clearly reflected in the erosion of collegialism and institutional democracy in the university, as administrators centralize more power, make more decisions in secret, and bypass established collegial structures and processes - often in the name of better serving corporate clients. However, it is reflected in many other places as well, such as in the corporate language that is being adopted by our universities, in the displacement of academic by economic criteria in the allocation of institutional resources, and in new practices and criteria for evaluating and rewarding academics which are placing growing emphasis and value on entrepreneurial activities of various kinds.

The third and final impact of corporate links that I will mention is that they produce a fundamental shift not in how our universities do their work, but in the work that our universities do. Rather than simply doing research for business, or operating as does business, universities are progressively becoming knowledge businesses in their own right. Increasingly, universities and the academics within them are getting involved in lucrative entrepreneurial activities of their own— establishing commercial development offices, selling ringside seats to leading edge research, setting up spin-off companies, licensing valuable intellectual property, etc. And rather than small scale ventures that are

peripheral to the activities of academics and universities, these initiatives are consuming more and more of their money, effort, time, and other resources. This shift is a very important part of the discussion of corporate/university links. Among other things, it points to the fact that these links do not only come into the university from the outside, but also go out of the university from the inside.

Two additional points about the impact of corporate links on the university are worth emphasizing. First, the three kinds of changes that I've just described are not discrete, but inextricably linked and mutually reinforcing. Second, the impacts of corporate links on our universities are not additive, they are transformative. That is, these links are not an "add on" to the university, such that after their establishment we have the old university plus these links. Rather, they are an "add into" the university, that produces qualitative changes which pervade its multiple and interacting aspects and dimensions including its culture, its system of governance, its methods of allocating resources, its reward structures, and so forth.

Thus far, I've addressed some of the impacts of corporate links on our universities. One final piece of the problem I need to lay out has to do with the implications of these changes. Although corporate links have brought some benefits to some corporations, academics, parts of universities, and citizens, it seems to me that these benefits are far outweighed by the costs. In particular, Canadian citizens do not benefit much from these links, as in various ways they erode the ability and willingness of universities and academics to serve the public interest.

For instance, although the Canadian public still pays the lion's share of the costs of university research, they are getting diminishing returns on their investment, as the research they support increasingly becomes the private property of corporations, universities, and/or academics (Atkinson-Grosjean, 1999). Should various members of the public wish to access the results or products of the research they helped pay for, they must pay for them again. This is assuming that research results are accessible, which may not be the case for a variety of

reasons including exclusive licensing agreements and prohibitively high monopoly prices. Not only may the public not benefit directly from the results of academic research, they may fail to benefit from it indirectly, such as when researchers refrain, either by necessity or choice, from sharing their knowledge and expertise with various publics in a variety of fora, including the students in their classrooms, the audiences at public lectures, or the readership or viewership of various media.

There are many other ways in which public benefit from university research is being diminished. There is a lot of evidence suggesting that corporate involvement in academic research may slow the pace of knowledge production in the university, as people work in secret as opposed to sharing research results. Evidence also suggests that corporate involvement may harm the quality of knowledge production in the university, as areas are pursued not for their scientific merit, but for their commercial potential, and as the temptations and pressures to quickly produce desirable results increase (Turk, 2000). It is also important to emphasize that as the research agenda is skewed in the direction of business needs and interests, research that is needed by other groups, particularly disadvantaged groups who cannot afford to sponsor research, is not being done in the short term. Even more seriously, the ability to do this kind of research may atrophy or disappear in the long term.

Finally, at the same time that our universities become less and less useful to more and more of us, corporate links are also rendering our universities less trustworthy and reliable. As academics and universities become more involved with business ventures of others or of their own, they become less **able** to protect the public from harm, as the Olivieri case illustrates. They also become less **willing** to protect the public from harm, as the case of David Healy and the growing number of scandals involving university business ventures— both legal and fraudulent— suggest<sup>2</sup>. Ultimately, the corporatization of the

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<sup>2</sup> For a disturbing account of some of the scandals that have emerged in the United States, see Press and Washburn (2000).

university threatens to leave our society without a disinterested source of expertise to which we can turn for assessments or advice on important social, economic, and political questions. More than simply eroding the university's public service mission, it might be fair to say that corporate links actually serve to invert it: rather than using academic resources to serve the public's needs and interests, universities are using public resources to serve their own and other private needs and interests.

Although this discussion has been both brief and simplified, I hope it is clear why I and some others have long argued that the best, indeed the only, response to university/industry research links is to get rid of them. As these links do not simply produce particular problems for the university, but rather fundamentally or organically transform its very nature and function, it is not possible to redress their impact through any other means, particularly through mechanical means, such as regulation. You can imagine my surprise and concern, then, with the growing consensus that has developed around the strategy of regulation, which has become almost unanimous since the Olivieri case. Whereas it had been my tendency to see support for the regulatory response as a simple error in judgment on the part of various people and organizations, in preparing this paper, I realized that it is actually something more significant. It is a clue that the issue of university/industry links is being redefined. It is a symptom that the problem is being reframed.

Particularly since the Olivieri case, the issue of university/industry links is being remade in a way that is similar to the story of the activist and the police that I referred to earlier. That is, only particulars of a certain nature are being extracted from the situation, and the intrinsic connectives or interactions between the selected particulars— and those that are not selected— are either minimized or broken. As the size and complexity of the problem is reduced, it appears capable of resolution by new means. Indeed, it appears to mandate resolution by new means.

So what are the particulars that are extracted from the larger whole and presented as **the** problems posed by university/industry

links? It seems to me that these particulars are those that have bearing on a certain conception of academic freedom: they are those particulars that undermine the conditions necessary for academics to carry out their work professionally, ethically, and with integrity. Some of the key issues that have been raised include overly long publication delays, restrictions on academics' ability to publish their results irrespective of their findings, restrictions on academics' ability to share information in a timely way with relevant parties (such as patients in drug trials), other forms of undue corporate influence over the academics working for or with them, and the trivial nature of some corporate sponsored research (e.g., Lewis et al, 2001). The issue of disclosure has received quite a bit of attention as well, the assumption being that if we are aware that academics have some stake in the research they are doing for corporations, they and/or we will be more vigilant of overt and particularly covert biases that may taint research processes or outcomes.

It is not my intention to suggest that these issues are by any means trivial or that they do not need to be redressed in some way. My point is that the extraction of only these particulars from the much larger whole of which they are a small part diminishes our understanding of the problems posed by university/industry links in both quantitative and qualitative terms. The focus on only this subset of issues excludes from the discussion and renders invisible many other important issues, such as the skewing of the academic research agenda, the transformation of university governance, and the growing privatization of publicly subsidized knowledge. Further, the presentation of the selected issues as discrete problems that are connected only in the sense of potentially threatening academic freedom, conceals the intrinsic linkages between them and between them and the many other issues that are dropped out of the discussion. It also conceals the multiple and complex ways in which all these issues interact. The combined result is that we cannot see **that**, nor can we possibly deduce **how**, corporate links are producing a fundamental transformation in what our universities do and in what they are. All we can see is that these links produce a series of

narrow, discrete, and technical problems, in a university that remains essentially unchanged.

Further, as the problem of university/industry links is thus reframed, it becomes capable of resolution, and demands resolution, by new means. The problem no longer calls out for radical responses, such as the elimination of university/industry links. Indeed, this response now not only seems unnecessary, it seems wildly disproportionate and inappropriate to the problem. The logical and appropriate response to a series of discrete and technical problems is a series of discrete and technical regulations. The only remaining questions, which are the ones that the Olivieri case has opened up to debate, are regulation of what kinds, at what levels, etc. What is perhaps most sad about this reframing is that while we are putting, and will have to put, great amounts of energy into regulating university/industry links, we will not even begin to redress a whole slew of problems produced and reinforced by these links, much less the conversion of our universities from public serving institutions into knowledge businesses. On the contrary, we will be facilitating and legitimizing this development, both by establishing the rules under which it may proceed and by producing the illusion, not the reality, that all associated problems are firmly under control.

Beyond restricting our general understanding of the impacts of university/industry links, and promoting an inadequate response to them, the ongoing reframing of the issue accomplishes a number of other things. In the interests of time, I briefly address only three of these.

First, this reframing transforms and narrows our conception of the public interest in academic research. It implies that the public interest is served if and when we protect academics' ability to conduct sponsored research professionally, responsibly, and ethically— that is, if and when academics cannot be forced or pressured by corporations into betraying or harming the public in some way. While this is surely a necessary condition of serving the public interest, it is by no means a sufficient one. On the one hand, it is quite a different thing to **enable** academics to work in a professional and ethical manner than it is to **oblige** them to work in this manner,

particularly in a context where entrepreneurial endeavors of all kinds— including of academics' own— are strongly promoted and rewarded in our universities. More importantly, however, serving the public interest involves far more than not being unprofessional or unethical in our research. It involves being aware of and responsive to a variety of social needs in a multiplicity of ways, which, as I noted earlier, corporate links render academics and universities progressively less able and less willing to do. Put differently, a focus on corporate threats to academic professionalism and integrity promotes a unidimensional and reactive conception of the public interest in academic research, as opposed to a multidimensional and proactive one. In the process, the public is repositioned as a passive recipient or object of university research, as opposed to the ultimate owner and subject of university research, and the university's growing attention and responsiveness to private needs and interest is normalized, as opposed to being opened up to critique and challenge.

As well as our conception of the public interest, this reframing also narrows and transforms our conception of academic freedom. Specifically, it reduces academic freedom from a condition of work that is collectively produced and sustained into to set of individual, professional rights. This is problematic for a number of reasons. For one, true autonomy in our work requires much more than our having a series of rights and obligations that sustains and legitimizes our professional status and privilege. Above all, it requires our active and collective involvement in shaping the larger context or environment within which all our work is carried out. In encouraging us to focus on defining and defending our individual, professional rights through regulation, this reframing diverts our attention and energies from the multiple ways in which corporate links are reducing our collective autonomy by eroding academic collegialism and institutional democracy, skewing the allocation and availability of institutional resources, and transforming methods and criteria for evaluating and rewarding academic work. Thus, rather than leading us to protect our academic freedom, this reframing may lead us to think and act in

ways that ultimately serve to compromise it. It is worth further noting that the conception of academic freedom as a set of individual, professional rights helps to reinforce a growing tendency among academics to see themselves as independent knowledge professionals as opposed to public servants. In the long run, this stance may also curtail if not imperil academics' freedom, as a public that derives decreasing benefit from the university provides decreasing support to it.

My final point is that both separately, and particularly when combined, the two dynamics I just described serve to further limit the discursive and political space available both to the general public and to academics to critique and resist the corporatization of our universities. Thus, more than simply impairing our understanding of, and response to, the problems of university/industry links, the reframing I've been discussing actually serves to entrench and intensify them. Not only is it not helpful in dealing with the problem of corporate links, it is itself becoming part of the problem. All the more reason for us to reject both it and the strategy of regulation that it recommends to us.

In closing, I would say that the special challenges for the sciences in terms of university/industry links are twofold. First, we need to resist the temptations of the regulatory approach that seems to promise us our cake of corporate collaboration and the sustained public support that would allow us to eat it too. This temptation keeps us from recognizing and defending our true interests as academics, which are inextricably related to our recognizing and defending a broad conception of the public interest. The second challenge is to deepen our understanding of the impacts of university/industry research links in order to devise effective strategies to

free ourselves from them. While by no means an easy task, this is still very much a goal that we can achieve. Not only may the process be far less costly than many of us might think, but even the costs might yield a number of benefits, such as promoting more collaborative, innovative, and well-rounded research.

I would like to end with a favorite quote from Wittgenstein who once said that the way to solve the problem you see in life is to live your life in such a way that the problem disappears. Let's not get rid of the problems of university/industry research links by thinking these problems away. Let's instead get rid of the problems by doing away with university/industry research links.

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