

# **Scholars on Air. Academics and the Broadcast Media in Britain<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

How difficult is it for political scientists in Britain to engage with the mass media and what benefits can they expect from it? On the basis of a survey of academics from all disciplines who appear frequently on the broadcast media, a second survey of political scientists and interviews with academics, journalists and producers we examine how often UK academics appear on the media, how they manage to get invited to appear and what they talk about over the airwaves. The evidence points among other things to the predominantly passive role of scholars, especially social scientists, as media commentators and the limited opportunities that traditional broadcast media offer for research dissemination. If getting research out to a wider audience is a key goal of media engagement, then blog posts appear to be more effective than seeking radio or TV coverage. The article goes on to explore the implications of the results for the wider normative debate about the need for academics to engage with the public through the media.

## **Introduction**

Should academics make greater efforts to engage with the media? This is in fact two questions, one normative and one empirical. The normative question relates to the broader issue of whether research agendas and academic career incentives should be reoriented. Instead of academics spending their time writing for a narrow band of academic specialists who, since the expansion of education in the last sixty years, make up their main audience, they should deal more frequently with issues of interest to wider publics, and academic career incentives and research funding should be changed to encourage this. Those in favour of greater public engagement point to a general civic duty of scholars to take part in debates as well as a more specific obligation to provide something of value to the public that directly or indirectly funds them (Calhoun 2006).

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Those who argue against such obligations point to the need for professional autonomy in general and oppose threats to academic freedom in particular (see Boden and Epstein 2011). The empirical question is one of effort and reward: do the benefits for academics from media engagement make it worth pursuing?

This paper deals with the empirical question. As will be discussed in the conclusion, the normative and empirical questions are related, but neither side in the normative debate about public engagement suggests that academics should not in principle exercise academic freedom by engaging with the media. The perspective from which we approach the empirical question is that of the costs and consequences of media engagement for British political scientists. Among social sciences, political science has been argued to have had special problems with media engagement with non-academics able to fill media roles that politics scholars would otherwise be under pressure to fill (Stark 2002). Moreover within political science the question of media involvement attracted a minor controversy in 2012 as Flinders (2012) and John (2012) disagreed about how much or little British political scientists did to publicise their research through the (old and new) media, although both agreed that dissemination of political science research through the media was a good thing.

Our examination of the costs and consequences of media engagement is based on two surveys (see Appendix A). The first, conducted in February and March 2013 asked 351 academics of all disciplines from 26 universities who had appeared frequently on the media about their experiences ("the media experts survey"). The second, conducted between April and June 2013, surveyed 624 academics in political science. This survey included respondents who had not appeared on the media as well as those who had ("the politics survey"). We also conducted 30 interviews with academics (half political scientists and half not) about their media experiences and spoke to 15 radio and TV producers and journalists<sup>1</sup>. The interviews with the political scientists focussed on relations with the media in the discipline, interviews with journalists and non-political scientists covered their experiences of media-academic relations more generally. Print media are no less important than the broadcast media as means by which academics

engage with a wider public. Yet for practical reasons -- we had limited time and resources -- the focus of this research is on the broadcast media, although we can at times make some comparisons across different types of media.

The paper starts by taking stock of precisely how much media engagement there is among British political scientists before going on to look at how hard it is for academics to get on the media. We explore the degree to which some academics might find it easier to appear on the media because of who they are, what they study or where they work and the kind of effort they put into trying to get on to the media. We go on to show that these efforts are limited in their effects by the way in which radio and TV journalists and producers go about finding and engaging academic contributors, although some forms of academic effort seem to work better at attracting the attention of media types than others. Nevertheless, it is the journalists and producers who decide who and when academics appear and what they talk about when they do. This brings us to the rewards of media engagement and we go on to look at the evidence to support a range of likely motivations for academics seeking to appear on the media, including extrinsic rewards, such as pay and promotion and creating greater awareness of your research and intrinsic rewards such as seeing yourself on TV or “doing your bit” for your discipline or university. We also examine this question of rewards from the other side: what reasons do academics give for not wanting to appear on the media. In the conclusion we go on to explore the implications of the empirical results for the normative question of academics and media engagement.

### **How many political scientists appear on broadcast media?**

Somewhat surprisingly, nearly half of political scientists questioned (46 per cent) had appeared on national broadcast media in the past two years, and 39 per cent on local radio. Academics were only marginally more likely to have written for, or been quoted in, newspapers: 51 per cent had appeared in national newspapers over the past two years, and 34 per cent in local papers. Taking national and local media together, only 47 per cent had not appeared on national or local broadcast media and 44 per cent had appeared in neither national nor local papers. If we add print and broadcast media together only a

minority, 34 per cent, had not appeared in either press or broadcast media at all over the period.

**Table 1 Political scientists’ public appearances in the last two years**

	None	Once or twice	More than twice
National radio/TV	54	26	20
Local radio	61	22	17
National newspapers	49	31	20
Local newspapers	66	22	12

N=598; source: Politics survey

While the numbers of political scientists appearing in the broadcast media by this measure appear high (and are possibly exaggerated by sampling and response bias, see Appendix A), only a minority of those appearing did so more than once or twice. Thus if we leave aside those who had made one or two appearances, only one in five had more frequent media appearances over the preceding two years (Table 1). As Bastow, Dunleavy and Tinkler (forthcoming 2014) suggest, academics have “more commonly been involved in one-off relationships with the media than sustained ones”.

### **How difficult is it for academics to appear on the media?**

#### *The impact of subject and demography*

Some political scientists appear more likely to get on the media because of what they do. Scholars' sub-discipline appears to have an impact on the likelihood of appearing on the media (Table 2), with the majority of scholars of Middle Eastern politics making frequent media appearances (55 per cent) and those with research interests in how politics is taught (8 per cent) as well as political theorists (11 per cent) less likely than average to have appeared frequently. The importance of the subdiscipline seems more likely to be a result of apparent differences in the media demand for the subdiscipline than the number of academics in it: the correlation between the two columns in Table 2 is (at  $r=-0.09$ ) statistically insignificant.

**Table 2: Media appearances of political scientists by sub-discipline**

<b>Sub-discipline*</b>	<b>% appearing twice or more</b>	<b>N</b>
Teaching politics	8	50
Political theory and philosophy	11	108
Asian	15	20
Urban and environmental	15	33
Politics of development	15	34
Globalization	16	49
Public administration, management and policy	16	114
Gender	16	44
Latin America	20	10
European Union	21	105
Comparative	21	116
American politics	23	35
Comparative European	23	114
International relations	24	101
Methodology	26	38
British	26	228
Russian and post-Soviet	27	25
Strategic and security studies	27	41
African	28	14
Individual European countries	28	82
Political communication	29	52
Middle East	55	20
Other	23	81
All subdisciplines	20	607

\*respondents were able to choose more than one sub-discipline  
Source: Politics survey

There also seem to be some demographic features associated with media appearances. Underrepresented as they are among university teachers, women are significantly less likely than men (by 23 per cent to 11 per cent) to appear frequently in the media (all bivariate relationships quoted in this paper are significant at  $p < .05$  using a chi squared test unless otherwise stated). Older academics are more likely to appear frequently on the broadcast media than younger scholars. 29 per cent of politics scholars over 65 have appeared more than twice over the past two years compared with 23 per cent of those aged 46-64, 20 per cent of those aged 31-45 and 2 per cent of those aged 30 and under.

**Table 3 Appearances on the media by region of respondents' location**

Region	% appearing twice or more	N
Wales	45	20
Northern Ireland	33	21
East England	32	22
North West England	23	48
South East England	22	81
North East England	22	23
South West England	22	50
London	18	117
East Midlands	17	42
Scotland	16	62
West Midlands	15	48
Yorkshire and the Humber	13	53
Outside the UK	10	10
Total	20	597

Source: Politics survey

One might expect academics located in major media centres above all London and the South East to appear disproportionately more frequently on the media. Table 3 shows this is not the case: London academics appear on the media at slightly below average rates, and those based in the South East appear at slightly above average rates (the differences are not statistically significant). The most striking and significant difference at the top of Table 3 is that political scientists from Wales are substantially more likely than others to appear on the broadcast media. The figures need to be treated with caution because of the highly differential geographical sizes and transport structures of the regions, and the nearest radio or TV studio may be closer for an average East of England based academic than one based in Yorkshire and Humberside. The figures might to a limited degree reflect supply and demand as the correlation between the percentage of academics appearing frequently and the number of academics in the region is negative ( $r=-0.33$ ), though with so few cases (13 regions) not statistically significant. We are unable to determine the university at which each respondent is located (the questionnaire was anonymous and did not ask about the employing university), so it is not possible to identify higher and lower performing institutions in this respect.

### *The impact of effort*

While the impact of things over which one has limited or no control in the short term, subject, gender, age and region, appears significant, how much can the efforts made by academics affect their chances of appearing on the media? Some political scientists have taken active steps to interest the media in their research (19 per cent); these are more likely (30 per cent) to have appeared more than twice on the media than those who have not (17 per cent). Moreover, it might be expected that scholars that use social media to get across their research might be more likely to appear on the media as they already have publicised their research widely and shown a willingness to engage in wider dissemination activities. 46 per cent of political scientists said they use Twitter in connection with their academic work and 53 per cent have blogged. Those who use Twitter are somewhat more likely to have appeared on the media at least three times (24 per cent) than those that do not (16 per cent). Those who blog (36 per cent) are more likely to have appeared frequently on national broadcast media than those who do not blog (15 per cent).

Or it might be that those who are more generally active as researchers are more likely to be active in seeking opportunities for media engagement. The evidence certainly suggests there is no real trade-off between academic productivity and frequent appearances in the media. Those politics academics who have three or more publications over the past two years are nearly four times more likely (27 per cent) to have appeared frequently than those with one or two publications (7 per cent).

Of course some of these variables associated with media appearances are related. For instance, women, as has been noted elsewhere (Bird 2011), tend to show lower levels of research activity (81 per cent of women in our politics survey had written one or more articles for academic journals in the past two years compared with 89 per cent of men). Women are significantly underrepresented in some sub-disciplines which are more associated with media appearances in Table 2 (British, comparative European and individual European countries) and overrepresented in the subdisciplines teaching politics

and gender politics which have academics with lower rates of media appearances. While women were marginally more likely (50 per cent) to use Twitter than men (45 per cent), they were significantly less likely to have contributed to a blog on the basis of their academic work (43 per cent compared with 56 per cent of men), and less likely (13 per cent) to have actively sought media interest in their work than men (23 per cent).

To offer a more discriminating account of the relative contribution of each of the variables discussed in this section we performed a multiple regression with the dependent (binary) variable of whether the respondent had appeared more than twice on broadcast media over the past two years and the variables discussed above as independent variables. The stepwise regression indicated that the most significant variables (in descending order) in predicting likelihood of appearing on the media more than twice were whether the respondent had contributed to a blog (with a standardised slope of +0.23), the sub-discipline in which s/he works (+0.21), region (+0.18), level of research activity (+0.17), and age (+0.13). Other variables -- gender, tweeting and actively seeking media attention -- were not significant and not included in the regression equation (with an overall  $r$  squared of 0.21, variables described in Appendix B). This is not to suggest that gender, actively seeking media attention and tweeting are not part of the story in explaining how some academics get to appear on TV and radio more than others. Rather that the effects of these variables that were apparent in bivariate analysis are mediated by, or are associated with, the variables that were included in the equation such that they appear to have no independent and direct effect on the likelihood of making media appearances.

### *They were sent for*

The multiple regression offers some clues about how easy it is for academics to appear on the media. It appears that while the chances of appearing on the media are shaped by some things that are harder to change -- your age, the particular sub-discipline and the region in which you work -- some other influential features are easier to change: remaining research active and blogging. However, we should not get carried away by the thought that whether or not they appear on the media is entirely in the hands of the researchers themselves.



We asked our political scientists how much interest in their work existed in the media by asking "Thinking about broadcast media only (national, regional or local radio or TV), which of the following statements applies?" and included the options set out in Table 4. Table 4 shows that a large proportion, 52 per cent, either had not tried to interest the media in their work (45 per cent), or had tried and failed (7 per cent). Of those who had attracted some media interest in their work, this came more often as a result of producers and journalists taking the initiative: 28 per cent did not need to interest the media in their work as they were interested already, over twice as many as the 13 per cent who had managed to get media interest by their own efforts. Even those political scientists who appeared a lot on the airwaves might not see direct results from their efforts to interest the media in their work. One who appeared particularly frequently argued:

You are kind of offering...even if you're quite well known in your area...I'm quite well known in French politics...but I get...sort of 'no thanks' like everybody does. So you don't really put yourself out there. You offer the stuff, and a lot of the time it gets taken and a lot of the time it doesn't.

**Table 4: Political Scientists seeking media interest**

	N	%
I have tried to interest them in my work, but largely without success	40	7
I have tried to interest them in my work, and with success	79	13
I did not need to try to interest them as they were interested already	165	28
I have not tried to interest them in my work	271	45
Other	41	7
Total	596	100

Source: Politics survey

This finding is also supported by our media experts survey (of academics from all disciplines who appear frequently on the media). When we asked them about their latest media appearance, the clear majority were approached directly by the media (68 per cent) or through the University press office (25 per cent), and only 3 per cent appeared after taking the initiative to contact the media. While academic effort can result in media

appearances, for the most part the message from the surveys appears to be "you can call us, but better we call you".

Our interviews with TV and radio producers and journalists reinforced the idea that contacts with academics generally came at the instigation of the media rather than academics. The practices between different radio and TV programmes vary, of course. However, we spoke to those involved in general news programmes as well as specialised programmes, and none indicated that academics contacting them was a significant source of invitations to appear on the media. One producer of a specialist radio programme that had a high proportion of academic contributions each week indicated that self-advertisement was unlikely to be successful: in response to our question of whether they invite people on who have contacted them about their work "We are more likely to get people writing books to do that. Occasionally you get academics and press offices to do that, but generally it's not something we respond to." Cowley's (2013) description of the reaction of a generally academic-friendly journalist to "a large number of emails from university PR and press bods, offering quotes from their university's academics for his stories" also reinforces the low standing of much academic initiative in contacting the media with their views:

he said, that most of these emails were next to useless .. they offered Statements of the Blindingly Obvious ... 'Syria: not very nice all things considered, but jolly tricky, and won't be easy to solve, says professor'.. He couldn't do anything with material like that. So he'd hit delete

The responses to our question to journalists and producers about how people came to be invited to appear tended to emphasise existing contacts. Some big names may be sought to attract an audience. As a producer of a news programme suggested "There are 'box office' academics who you will just ask because they are well known and interesting. For example [Richard] Dawkins, Niall Ferguson. We'll just ask because they are them in themselves". Others are sought because they can be relied on to give the kind of commentary that fits the type of broadcast they are expected to make. A journalist on a radio news programme said

For less niche stuff we look at who we have had in before. Tony Travers is on local government stories everywhere. He is good, he knows his stuff, LSE is prestigious and it helps that he is on things enough that people recognise him and get to know him. People who are amiable, easy to get hold of and have been on before become part of a 'virtuous circle' and get continually recycled through the system.

Some sort of contact and track record of appearing on the media came across as a significant criterion for selection in all the interviews we conducted with journalists and producers.

Only 19 per cent of the academics with media experience in our media experts survey agreed that "only academics with contacts" get invited on to the media. Yet the same survey shows, unsurprisingly, that those who appear more frequently develop more contacts with media people and are later more likely to appear on the media frequently. Table 5 presents the relationship between the number of contacts respondents in the experienced media academics survey reported and the number of appearances on TV and Radio; the relationship is highly significant ( $p < 0.0001$ ).

**Table 5 Appearances on TV/Radio and Media Contacts**

		N media appearances	
		0-2	3-7
N contacts	1-3	41% (69)	16% (29)
	4+	59% (99)	84% (153)

Source: Media experts survey

However, the mobilisation of contacts and repeat media appearances cannot account for all media appearances. How do producers and journalists find fresh faces to appear on their programmes? The importance of reputation and hearing or seeing academics on other programmes means that many fresh faces to one programme will not be new to the media. The bias in favour of established names is strong, but does not rule out the

inclusion of new ones.

Our interviews suggest that for some programmes, especially those with smaller staffs, invitations to appear are likely to be a matter of a producer or journalist doing their own research and coming up with a name. For one news programme with larger staff there were "guest getters". However, the process of finding people was similar: an almost serendipitous search, usually involving Google where no familiar candidate came to mind. The big news programme described how the guest getters went about their work "Our process of getting new people is the same as anybody: you just look it up on the internet". For another news programme the producer explained "We do Google searches to find academics that specialise in the subject we would be interested in." And with another news programme a journalist explained: "We type their name into Google and see what comes up. The other day I was looking for an expert so just typed in 'sports nutrition professor' and got a guy from [Name of University] to comment".

As the journalists and producers recognised, the process of searching is haphazard. As one said "It works quite well, though I imagine it is pretty hit and miss. I'm sure that there's lots of untapped authority and expertise". However, engaging people they are not familiar with is not random. The journalists and producers pointed to things, in addition to having a good reputation for media appearances on other programmes, that bring academics into their orbit, above all blogs.

As seen in the previous section, blogging (but not tweeting) is related to a higher propensity for political scientists to appear on the media. Among our media experts blogging is significantly related to the frequency of appearances on radio and TV ( $p < .001$ ) although tweeting is less significantly related ( $p = 0.05$ ) to media appearance frequency. The importance of blogs (and those from LSE and Nottingham were spontaneously mentioned by several media respondents) in attracting journalists and producers came over in the interviews. For example one producer said "Blogs are often useful when looking into the academics that we want on the show, as they can reveal a lot about the academics' expertise." Another producer said "Blogs help a lot because then

you can see if they write interesting things in that blog then you read it and you can put someone on. A lot of Americans got through that". Though one producer pointed out that they could be put off by the style of the blog: "Where it is less interesting is where it adopts a party political tinge. I don't need it from this source, I can get this elsewhere".

For tweets the interviews with journalists and producers were less encouraging, but in line with the survey evidence. One argued: "For those with no foothold in broadcasting, it's unlikely to get them that first foothold. But for those with the first foothold already, it draws attention to them and is a valuable tool." And another "Tweets? – Not usually that helpful, although I do follow a few academics and use some of their tweets for story ideas. When I have time, I tweet for the show and hash-tag the academic we may be interviewing in the hope they may re-tweet. I suppose that if they have a huge following I do take that into account - as it increases publicity for the show." Yet another linked tweets with blogs: "I'm interested in following ... some academics at Nottingham, Cowley and Fielding, who blog and tweet. I know them".

### **What is in it for the academics?**

#### *A way of disseminating research*

One of the reasons that academics might find media appearances valuable is the possibility of getting their research across to a wider audience. The respondents to the media experts survey, i.e. those likely appear on the media frequently, agreed overwhelmingly (93 per cent) with the proposition that "going on radio or TV is a good way to get your research across to a wider audience".

Yet it is also apparent that academics do not generally talk about their research when they appear. In our media experts survey we asked about the subject of respondents' most recent media experience. Relatively few academics, 28 per cent, actually talked about their "own research" and a further 9 per cent spoke about research in their field. 52 per cent spoke about issues for which they have expertise, but not their own research, 9 per cent about issues in areas where they "have some knowledge" and 3 per cent cited other topics.

In the media experts survey social scientists were the least likely (16 per cent) to have talked about their own research when they last appeared on radio or TV, natural scientists (45 per cent) and medical scientists (38 per cent) were the most, with arts and humanities in between (30 per cent)(see also Bastow, Dunleavy and Tinkler forthcoming 2014, chapter 8). This is not to say that what academics talk about is unrelated to their research as several of those interviewed suggested that their research was related to the topics they were called on to discuss. A political scientist who had appeared frequently said "although the journalists don't always ask direct questions about my research, my research informs my answers to the questions". It is just that media appearances rarely offered academics the chance to talk directly about their research.

The interviews with journalists and producers highlighted that they were in charge of the agenda of academic appearances on the media. One expressed this in rather blasé terms "Often they'll be in my Blackberry phonebook. If we've used them before, and they're articulate and willing to be pushed around and shorten their answers to fit our slot then we'll use them. It also helps if they're willing to come to us". Others were generally less emphatic but still suggested that academics were called to fill a slot defined by journalists and producers. For example one specialist programme producer argued "We find that academics do appear quite a lot because they can give us comments on a story in a way that news and current affairs don't; because news and current affairs are going for the main actors if you like in a story; the people that are driving it", and another from a radio programme specialising in discussing controversies said "We would get people to talk about a particular piece of research but they've got to draw conclusions from it; it's got to be something that forms a world view or a moral position – it's got to illustrate that; it's no good saying well here are my findings, I present them to the world; make of them what you will. We do want people to give opinions, that's the point, and make arguments." Whatever the format of the programme, it is a matter of finding academics willing and able to perform accordingly.

It is thus hardly a surprise that the majority of academics appearing on the media (60 per

cent of the media experts survey) believe that "journalists tend to push you to oversimplify" (21 per cent disagreed), although only a minority (31 per cent) agreed that "journalists tend to push academics to say things they don't want to say" (42 per cent disagreed). These figures were broadly the same across all academic disciplines. All in all, radio and television do not appear to offer very promising routes for the public dissemination of academic research.

*Other forms of satisfaction*

Why do academics appear on the media? Those with media experience tend to agree (55 per cent) that appearing on the media "helps your academic career" (only 9 per cent disagree, the remaining 36 per cent neither agree nor disagree). However, such direct career motivations do not appear to be the most important reasons. We offered a list of possible motivations from which respondents could indicate as many as they liked as "major attractions" (Table 6).

**Table 6 Most Attractive Features of Media Appearances for Academics**

<b>Reason</b>	<b>% "A major attraction"</b>	<b>% "Biggest single attraction"</b>
Enjoyment	60	26
Publicise research	55	24
University publicity	58	14
Discipline benefit	45	10
Show impact	46	10
Academic profile	33	6
Funding bodies	19	5
Money	1	0
Promotion	5	0
None of above	NA	6

N=331; Source: Media experts survey

From what our respondents told us, what might have been assumed to be a strong direct material incentive, money, was unlikely to be a major attraction not least because the amounts involved are usually so small. As one said when asked about payments:

Actually, I don't mind telling you how much it is. So say for something like the Guardian online, £90, newspaper £300, Telegraph, £500, BBC interview, £50. *[Interviewer: Is that to appear on the BBC?]* Yeah. Sometimes it's nothing. Either way after tax, it's all so little it's not worth worrying about.

Another pointed out

I appear on Sky a lot, the Sunrise show. I'll be on set for 3 or 4 minutes. But that means getting up at 4.30am, hanging around etc. So if I get paid £75 for an appearance, it might sound like a lot of money for a [short] appearance but in reality it's 3 or 4 hours out of my time.

In Table 6 the direct material benefits of money and promotion do not feature at all as "the biggest single attraction" and very few consider either a "major attraction" of broadcast media appearances.

However other direct personal benefits related to engagement with the academic subject were important. The enjoyment of talking about one's subject (26 per cent saw this as the biggest attraction) and publicising one's research (24 per cent) are the most popular attractions of media appearances. Enjoyment appears to cover a wide range of different experiences, as a range of write-in comments on our media experts survey suggested, ranging from those associated with participating in the programme ("I like the challenge of saying something substantial on programmes -- mostly arts programmes -- that aren't restricted to sound bites"), to those associated with engaging with wider debates ("I enjoy it because ... it is one of the few things that I do that is likely to lead to a wider engagement with the community outside the academic bubble") to enjoyment of the recognition the process brings:

I very much enjoy students not only telling me that they are watching my TV programmes but that their parents and grandparents are watching as well! Something lovely about that. I also feel that my media work makes me seem more 'real' to my students.

Though another write-in comment pointed out that such fame can be illusory:

And I think anyone who does it thinking they are there because they are God's gift is an idiot. The media will use you when it suits them and then drop you when it



doesn't - possibly for good. Before long you'll be completely forgotten - and anyway, the number of people who actually notice what you do is tiny: you're little more than a legend in your own lunchbox. My kids find it hilarious.

Esteem within the profession was also important: if we include three categories of response from Table 6 as reflecting esteem (arising from showing impact, building one's academic profile and impressing funding bodies), 21 per cent felt one of these was the most important attraction.

A larger proportion pointed to broader altruistic motives, albeit ones that might later reflect well on their careers and esteem: 24 per cent cited the benefits to the university or the profession as the major attraction of appearing on the media. Several respondents pointed out the university's liking for good publicity

.. you're on for 10 seconds, 3 million people see it. I mean how much would that cost universities, to reach that many people through advertising? You may get someone saying 'I'm gonna apply there, instead of ... [a top Russell Group university]' (laughs). Sorry. [The University authorities] are grateful and like it. Won't give me any more money for it. But in a diffuse way, they definitely value it.

Another suggested "appearing is not compulsory but I would be surprised if you would find any universities that did not appreciate you doing it". Some respondents suggested this was especially important for less well-known universities

[You appear on the media to] make the university visible, get it known as a place of expertise. Make the public aware of their work. I mean you don't have that problem at [some other places], but at [this university media appearances] are good for being visible. [They are seen as a] good way to attract new students, so they know we're out there and see we have expertise.

Yet another said "I get brownie points from the Vice Chancellor for doing it". However, one write-in comment to our media experts survey suggested that some universities might not be so ready to recognise media appearances:

In terms of the institution however, this is not recognised, rewarded or appreciated even though I probably get their name .. into national and international media more

than anyone else in our institution.

### *Peer hostility*

One might assume that there is some hostility among academics who do not appear on the media to those that do. In Australia, and we have no reason to think the UK is any different, Orr (2010: 28-9) argues "Academia can be a cloistered and a bitchy place" and that this might lead to "mediaphobic" academics looking down on those that appear on the media since

Mediaphobia, or at least scepticism, remains a legitimate academic position. It is a response to three media traits, which are linked by the media's propensity to distort rather than simply mediate. These traits are the media's short attention span and the churning of news cycles; the media's preference for the scandalous or titillating, over considerations such as public policy; and the media's elevation of opinion into analysis. Each of these is anathema to the academic desire for reflection, depth and expert nuance.

Or, as one respondent, now a household name, put it "there's other academics who probably get fucking pissed off at seeing me on TV all the time".

We found very little evidence of such mediaphobic attitudes, even among those who did not appear. A large portion of our politics academics, 46 per cent, agreed that it "the duty of politics scholars paid by public money to appear on the media to talk about their work" and 29 per cent disagreed, the remaining 25 per cent neither disagreeing nor agreeing (Table 7). Those appearing on the media were more likely (65 per cent) to think it a duty than those who did not (38 per cent). Younger politics scholars up to age 45 were less likely to agree (42 per cent) than the over 45s (51 per cent).

We posed a range of further questions about academic engagement with the media (Table 7), asking whether the media "pushed" scholars to say what "journalists want to hear rather than what academics want to say" (63 per cent agreed), whether "politics scholars who appear on the media generally improve the standing of political studies in Britain" (62 per cent agreed), whether politics scholars appearing on the media tend to "dumb

down political research" (21 per cent agreed), whether academics were "generally not very good at making their research available to the general public" (33 per cent agreed) and whether the "better politics scholars tend to keep off radio and TV" (18 per cent agreed).

**Table 7: Views of politics scholars about the broadcast media.**

	Percentages				
	Agree strongly	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Disagree strongly
Radio and TV interviewers tend to push politics scholars to say things that journalists want to hear rather than what academics want to say	19	44	25	12	1
It is the duty of politics scholars paid by public money to appear on the media to talk about their work	12	34	25	20	9
The politics scholars who appear on the media generally improve the standing of political studies in Britain	10	52	29	7	1
Scholars who appear on the media tend to "dumb down" political research	5	17	27	42	9
Politics academics are generally not very good at making their research understandable to the general public	5	28	30	34	4
The better politics scholars tend to keep off radio and TV	5	13	34	35	13

N=600; Source: Politics survey

These figures do not suggest a polarisation between media-friendly academics who see the advantages and few downsides of media engagement and media-hostile academics who stay away from it. Moreover, if we add up all the negatives very few (3 per cent) had five or six out of six critical views, 17 per cent had no hostile views, with the bulk (59 per cent) having one or two critical views with 21 per cent having three or four. The number of critical views was significantly related to experience of media appearances. Those who had never appeared on the media had on average 1.81 negative views, those who had appeared once or twice 1.78 and those who had appeared on the media more often had

1.41. While significant, the relationship was not very strong ( $r=-0.11$  in a Pearson correlation).

Some of our respondents who appeared frequently on the media mentioned a lack of understanding and appreciation among colleagues that fell short of hostility. As one said:

[All] of this stuff takes up time. And you don't get...any reduction in your admin or in your teaching load...or if you're late for a meeting you get into trouble, you can't say "I'm terribly sorry I was at the BBC studios"... your colleagues will say "Okay, but this is your job". So from one point of view they are very supportive. From another point of view...maybe quite not so.

#### *What's not to like?*

If those who make media appearances enjoy it, what explains the reluctance of those who do not put themselves forward? While only one fifth of politics academics had sought to interest the media in their work, of those that did 65 per cent were successful. Given such high rates of success, we further asked those who did not try to get the media interested why they did not, the answers tended to suggest a rather diffuse lack of interest in seeking broadcast media attention (Table 8) -- a third were "just not interested" in seeking broadcast media attention and a quarter said it had not occurred to them to try, and a quarter said they did not know how to attract media attention. Answers that indicated that the media were considered unsuitable or untrustworthy for disseminating research, such as that the media could not be trusted to report the research fairly, were chosen by relatively few.

One reason we did not explore in the survey came out in several of the interviews with academics with substantial media experience: nerves and the fear of saying something embarrassing or wrong that would be broadcast. One said that she had turned down many requests to appear in the past "mainly due to nervousness" but now believed that she had to "step up to the plate". Another argued

You have to be fairly comfortable, but it is trainable. Lot of people out there with the inclination but are nervous in case they make a mistake. My first live

appearance was excruciating. Was scared in case I made one mistake. So you do need confidence boosting and training.

**Table 8 Reasons for political scientists not approaching media**

<b>Reason</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
I'm just not interested in attracting broadcast media attention	85	32
It did not occur to me to try to get broadcast media attention	70	26
I don't know how to go about attracting broadcast media attention	63	24
The approach adopted in my work is too technical or theoretical to attract media attention	45	17
There is not much interest outside academia in the issues I deal with	36	14
I prefer to use blogs and/or social media to reach a wider audience	33	12
I do not trust the media to cover research like mine fairly	31	12
I prefer the press to the broadcast media	28	11
Other	51	19
Total	266	167*

\*Percentages add up to over 100 as multiple answers possible)

Source: Politics survey

### **Conclusions**

The costs of media engagement for political scientists do not appear to be particularly onerous if one considers that those who appear on the media do not appear to have to trade off media activity with their research. The extrinsic material rewards of engagement with the media appear slight as direct payment from the media and university employment-related benefits do not loom large in the claimed reasons for appearing on the media. One objective behind media appearances that attracts support in our survey, as well as in articles enjoining academics to engage with the media (Flinders 2012), is that media appearances allow academics to get their research across to a wider public. Yet this particular objective is very poorly served by the reality of how media-academic interactions work. The broadcast media tend overwhelmingly to initiate contacts with academics and when academics appear it is mostly to elucidate or comment on the stories and issues that those who invite them to appear have defined.

Other media are likely to be better as a means for publicising research. Certainly our respondents suggested newspapers are a mixed blessing as far as research dissemination are concerned. As one said:

If you are phoned by a [press] journalist, you know they have an agenda. They want to demolish your research. ... If a Daily Mail reporter phones you, you know they will be there to screw you. You will appear as the mad professor, or as someone who doesn't know their stuff with appalling research. ... The Guardian [and others like it have] an agenda, might be managed by [a] better journalistic culture, and be more subtle, but it has an agenda.

It is not likely to be much easier for academics to get op-ed pieces they have written based on their research printed in a national newspaper than it is for them to secure invitations to a radio or TV studio to talk about their research. Blogs are a more direct way of getting academic research known to a wider public (see Bastow, Dunleavy and Tinkler 2014, chapter 8). They have the additional virtue, as suggested by our evidence, of being looked at by journalists and producers and thus increasing the chances that their authors will appear on air.

In our introduction we argued that the empirical findings concerning the costs and consequences of academics appearing on the media can have a bearing on the normative question of whether the environment in which academics work – the questions they ask, the audiences they write for and how their work is funded – should be changed to produce a stronger engagement with the public. One set of circumstances where the two questions are related is when the general normative belief that academics ought to be engaging with the public serves as a motivation for individual academics to make efforts to seek media work. There is some evidence that this is the case; political scientists who have appeared more than twice are more likely (32 per cent) to agree strongly with the statement that political scientists have a duty to appear on the media, compared with those who have only appeared once or twice (12 per cent) or not at all (7 per cent) – a statistically significant association.

Our evidence cannot suggest that academics are wrong to feel this, but it can point out that there is no shortage of academics in the media and that public debate would not necessarily be enriched by more academics coming forward (or impoverished by fewer). There is no apparent shortage of commentators on issues for which political scientists appear qualified to go on the airwaves. As one radio producer said “I don’t think there’s a dearth of academics in the media”. We were somewhat surprised by the numbers of academics who have appeared on the media at all, though less by the fact that those that did only appeared once or twice. But even if these self-reported numbers are an exaggeration, none of the journalists and producers we spoke to suggested that more interviews with academics would be on the radio or TV if only they could find or persuade more to do them. So there is little reason for academics to feel that the media, and by extension citizens, are being shortchanged by too many academics being reluctant to go on air and thus leaving unfilled gaps in the media coverage of current events and other issues of public interest.

A second way in which the empirical and the normative questions can be related is when academic institutions and those that fund academic research put pressure on academics to engage with the media. Universities appear to be becoming increasingly enthusiastic about their employees getting press coverage, and the “impact” agenda of British governments in assessing the value of research involves media engagement. However, there are few signs yet that recruitment and careers have been restructured in any significant way to coerce such media engagement (Joy 2014; Lightowler and Knight 2013), and our evidence generally supports this conclusion. Yet it is not inconceivable that such pressures will grow and that conceptions of what academics should be will change such that they will be judged and rewarded increasingly on their ability to get on to the media. Our evidence suggests that this strategy of stronger incentivisation might be misguided. Insofar as it is based on a conception of getting research across to a wider audience, we know that media appearances offer few such chances to disseminate academic research. Blogs are likely to be superior vehicles for public engagement in research, and with the added attraction of increasing the chances that a producer or journalist will notice it. Moreover it is a matter of faith rather than empirical evidence

that any conceivable change in academic research agendas to what might be considered more “relevant” questions will result in better opportunities to publicise research on radio and television.

Our evidence further suggests that since some academics are no good at media appearances, there is support for the argument that it may be unwise or unfair to stipulate that all must do it. The counter to this might be that not all academics prove to be all that good at other things they are expected to do – say lecturing and writing. Why should they be excused being evaluated on media performance? As one respondent who frequently appeared on broadcast media pointed out bluntly "some people are born naturals but few of us are. Some of us really shouldn't do the media because we're crap". Of course, if they are no good at it, journalists and producers will excuse them anyway by not calling on them. Then the question would become whether it is the effort or the achievement that is the obligation on academics, and how one judges failure on either or both -- as a serious dereliction of duty or something subject to compensation by other strengths.



## **Appendix A**

The media experts survey, conducted in February and March 2013 asked 351 academics of all disciplines from 26 universities who had appeared most frequently on the media about their experiences. The sample was drawn up by first contacting the press offices of all 72 universities in the United Kingdom listed in the Political Studies Association Membership Handbook. Our original intention included an examination of how many academics who appeared frequently on the media were from political science and so we wanted universities where politics academics were located. We asked for each university to give the names of the academics, any discipline, who appeared most often on radio and television. Only 26 universities replied, although this included two-thirds of the Russell Group universities. We asked for approximately 20 names, and this search produced 574 names. 16 of the names were invalid, and of the 558 valid emails sent out we received 351 responses after three reminders, a response rate of 63 per cent.

For the Politics survey, conducted between April and June 2013, we sent out a questionnaire to every member of the Political Studies Association listed in its 2012 Members Handbook. Excluding invalid email addresses we sent out 1,010 questionnaires. We received 624 replies, a response rate of 62 per cent.

The sample of neither survey was random, and thus both must be presumed to be subject to selection bias. Unfortunately, the available statistics do not help us understand what this bias might be.

We would not expect our media experts to be representative of academics in higher education as a whole. If our estimates from the politics survey are correct, we would expect the respondents to the experts survey to be more male and older than academics in the population at large. 21 per cent of this sample were women (compared with 39 per cent of academics in HE institutions in 2011-12)(see HESA 2013 for the statistics used in this section ). The age structure of our media academic respondents had fewer younger academics (e.g. 1 per cent of the sample and 12 per cent of all academics in 2011-12 were under 30. and 54 per cent of the sample was aged 46-65 compared with 42 per cent of

academics at large). However, we have no available figures to explore in what way our sample is unrepresentative of academics who appear on the media.

Members of the Political Studies Association covers, by the Association's own estimates, 30 per cent of university staff in the field. It is difficult to estimate how non-members might differ from members in regard to the questions we ask. Since by some methods of assessing it, gender is related to media appearances we might anticipate any gender bias in our politics survey to have an impact on our estimates. In our politics sample 28 per cent were women. This is below the 39 per cent of women academics in business and social science in 2011-12. However, "political science and economics have represented particularly masculine areas of the social sciences" (Bird 2011). Bird (2103) gives the proportion of women in political science as 24 per cent. The Political Studies Association membership in 2012 was 30 per cent women. These figures point to, at most, a slight underrepresentation of women among our respondents.

However we were concerned that the questionnaire, asking about behaviour often associated with desirable attributes of being an academic -- publishing a lot and appearing on the media -- that this might lead to non-response and response bias in the survey and thus lead us to overestimate the frequency of such desired behaviours (see Paulhus 1991; Tourangeau and Yan 2007).

## **Appendix B**

In the regression equation we included as the dependent variable a simple binary variable reflecting whether the respondent reported appearing on the broadcast media more than twice. The subdiscipline variable is the standardised values of the predictions of the impact of 22 of the 23 subdiscipline dummy variables in table 2 (British Politics excluded) when regressed with the dependent variable. The regional variable was derived in a similar way, through generating the standardised values of the predictions of the impact of 12 of the 13 subdiscipline dummy variables in table 3 (London excluded) when regressed with the dependent variable. The age variable is the simple age categories we included in the questionnaire (1=under 30; 2=30-45; 3=46-65; 4=over 65), the research activity variable is the response to our question of how much the respondent has published in academic outlets over the last two years (1=nothing; 2=one or two pieces; 3=more than two pieces), and the blog variable is the answer to our question of whether the respondent has blogged over the past two years (1=no, 2=once or twice, 3=three times or more). Using the ordinal variables in this way gave results hardly any different to using permutations of dummy variables derived from the same questions. Gender, whether respondent used tweets for professional purposes and whether the respondent reported having taken active steps (whether successful or not) to interest the media were simple binary variables.

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