

Going Off Script: The Role of Critical Expert Studies in the Techno-Capitalist University

Sean Sturm and Stephen Turner

What critical role does the academic play in social life today? The critic and conscience role once taken up by “public intellectual” academics is problematic: firstly, because it is no longer clear who “the public” for whom they presume to speak is, and, secondly, because it is too easy for them to be written off by that public as professional moralists “out of touch with the real world” yet “paid for by oūr taxes.” The role of the “grass-roots” activist without “intellectual” pretensions, people recognise. The academic is a much reduced figure today anyway because universities work to limit their contribution to society to their “area of expertise” — which suits the public demand for pundits who give “the evidence” in soundbites.

Universities now serve society primarily as providers of expert knowledge workers for techno-capitalism. An ever-expanding technocracy in universities ensures the alignment of academic “performance” with this function through educational econometrics (measures of economic performance) like status and ranking. It is these measures, not any sense of a public mission or issues of public input, that now matter to universities. In turn, social futures, and the future public, is shaped by those who presume to be its critic and conscience in terms of econometrics, thereby reducing the gap between civic-minded student and performance-oriented employee. We suggest that *critical expert studies* might help, partly by way of questioning the very language of excellence,

success, futures, etc., and partly by imagining that those who engage in expert studies are not necessarily academics at all.

The critical expert intervenes in the acts, agencies and artefacts of social design. Proposed buildings, spaces, processes or other social initiatives are the product of design documents, a grey literature of experts from public and private agencies. In the hidden disassemblage of such designs, it is possible for critical-minded academics (and non-academics) to bring pressure to bear on the generic social scripts that encode social programming, that shape public life. Education, in this grey zone, does not involve speaking on anyone's behalf or speaking out to reach a wider public; it involves speaking *in*, that is, questioning the codes at work in design documents in order to expose their otherwise taken-for-granted values. The university is a good place to undertake such scriptwork, for it is the social institution that defines what we take expertise to be. In taking issue with such expertise, we take on something of the non-specialist role of the public intellectual, but without presuming a public, or presuming to talk to or for such an entity. What really is "public" then emerges in and through the questioning of expertise that ordinarily and clandestinely shapes social life.

This kind of non-expert expert studies subjects a proposed social initiative to the idea that it constitutes: it asks what an initiative does just because it exists – how and why has it come about – and what if it didn't exist. Many such initiatives aren't ideas at all, but simply propound and produce the generic received wisdom of "best practice" – an average of like actions taking place elsewhere in a kind of unreflexively global design imaginary – but disguised by the craft of designing documents. If the public, or public life, is the product of the operation of designing documents, we want to throw light on the *tekhne*, or craft, of this operation that functions to make its propositions unquestionably "good" (even "best"). In this activity, we see a public role for the Arts in these STEM-obsessed times, which is to see language of and about the public, or people, or social good *otherwise*. Such terms refer to things or gatherings that exceed the products of designing documents, and thereby pose counterpublics, possible worlds and as yet unimagined social futures.