Embracing our (non-scholarly) identities: The benefits of combining engagement with moral activism.

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The characteristics and lack of boundaries in social media present clear opportunities for scholars to engage communities in analytical dialogue. Many scholars feel pressed to remain morally neutral, so it can feel risky to engage in such commentary. But Brent E. Sasley and Mira Sucharov find there may actually be intellectual and social justice benefits to exploring insider identities and connecting engagement with moral activism.

Academic engagement in public commentary via social media and other digital outlets is being taken increasingly seriously. Scholars are coming to believe that this kind of writing is not only beneficial to the research process, but also relevant for tenure and promotion considerations. While these questions have become well-trodden, one issue that requires more consideration is the extent to which scholars can or should "shut off" their non-scholarly identities.

All of us identify with one or more communities—ethno-national, political, ideological, and so on. But because they are presumed to compromise objectivity, we have been socialized to believe that these commitments need to be put aside when we engage in scholarly work. To the extent that it was ever possible to do so (think of how many scholars are devoted to their methodological or theoretical approaches, perhaps at the expense of objective problem-solving), it seems that social media has made it even less possible. This is particularly the case when these prior political or philosophical commitments obviously connect with the subject matter at hand. In the January 2014 issue of *PS* we engage this question, and argue that there may actually be intellectual and social justice benefits to scholars embracing these identities.

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The characteristics, expectations, and lack of boundaries in social media present clear opportunities for scholars to take advantage of their identities to press their claims and engage their communities in analytical dialogue. This is for three reasons: First, because we are scholars who have studied a given issue-area for several years and who

have been trained to assess evidence, we are able to claim a level of expertise that even those passionate about an issue but whose job is not to study it cannot. Second, because we are insiders to our communities—in our case, in Jewish liberal-Zionist circles in North America and to a lesser extent in Israel—we have a level of entry and acceptance that can be denied "outsiders" and members of outgroups commenting on issues of communal importance. Third, our professional insights would normally be inaccessible to ordinary members of our community given the barriers to dissemination posed by traditional scholarly publishing venues.

Moreover, the specific nature of these new mediums enhances this ability. The presentation of arguments and evidence in blogs, through Facebook, and on Twitter requires scholars to be far more pithy and concise than they normally are. The speed of social media allows for a more instantaneous and sustained engagement. The egalitarian nature of these media does constrain scholars to some degree—anybody can call somebody else out on Twitter, and everybody can see it—but it also gives various communities the opportunity to more directly engage with us and therefore both be exposed to our arguments and perhaps to shape them, in the way that ethnographic immersion gives rise to.

The flattening of social and stylistic hierarchies wrought by social media also presents a challenge, one that can be both daunting and gratifying. While in our particular case, we have been professionally socialized to think in terms of "why" questions, the culture of social media pushes us toward the precipice of what have colloquially been called "WTF" questions (or more delicately, "why?!") questions. These are questions that seek not only to unravel scholarly mysteries, but to address issues of ethical frustration and moral outrage.

We recognize that for many scholars, especially those in the mainstream, this goes against the very identity we are expected to hold as academics. In International Relations, for example, mainstream theorists such as realists, liberals, and institutionalists have long been thought of and, indeed, play on their presumed role as objective analysts working to improve life. But Marxists, post-positivists, feminists, and constructivists have increasingly raised questions about the inherent activist nature of scholarship.

So for academics who have been socialized to remain morally neutral, it can feel risky to engage in digital commentary. But it can also, ultimately, be gratifying, as we can now engage a broader array of questions. We argue, then, that wedding this engagement to a moral activism is entirely appropriate—even necessary. Our own work on Jewish identity, Israel, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict lends itself well to such concerns.

One issue we did not grapple with enough in our piece is the effect of ideological policing on our scholar-blogger activities. When activist voices are bent on maintaining a certain hegemonic view of what constitutes loyalty to the group and fealty to a particular analytical spin, scholars who otherwise may have had an audience when they were writing solely in quieter, academic venues, may now, ironically, be shut out. Nowhere is this more evident than in analysis surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, though the dynamic is relevant to wherever academic and policy debates have become polarized in the popular imagination. As scholars move forward in the new public sphere, we will need to further consider these effects on our work.

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