



*David Starkey's comments linking ethnicity, poverty and August's rioting sparked outrage amongst academics who considered his opinion uninformed and offensive. [Paul Benneworth](#) argues that rather than deny him the oxygen of publicity, a content-based rebuttal from other academics is in order, and would prevent the growth of a culture which welcomes comment from only the absolute specialist.*

The idea of 'academic freedom' is an important part of impact debates. Although the term is regularly used and abused, the idea can be understood in terms of the duties which accrue in return for academics' privileges to follow their own instincts and curiosity.

The renowned higher education researcher [Professor Ron Barnett](#) coined the term 'social compact' to highlight this balance of duties and privileges. In return for freedom from interference in the minutiae of their research, academics have a duty to maximise the social benefit their research brings.

Academic freedom as a *duty* is therefore the freedom of academics to express an informed opinion in public discourse, on the basis of their research and scholarship, about a subject which might benefit from their view. The freedom is from punishment by one's employer in seeking to create public benefit by discharging their duty. The 'freedom' is the autonomy that scholars have to interpret how they fulfil their responsibilities. Like most freedoms, it is not unqualified, but has a public interest test (researchers should not shout 'fire' in a crowded theatre). And this freedom is absolutely central to the effective delivery of impact, particularly in the social sciences.

But this duty and responsibility creates an important dilemma: academics typically do very small pieces of research. Yet, academics may have insight into problems and questions beyond the results of their immediate experiments and studies. Academic freedom is highly personalised: academics typically choose to engage with and pronounce on topics of personal interest where they have opinions.

It is possible to judge the quality of contributions: 'good' pronouncements are those which best serve society as a whole. Hearing more opinions and arguments leads eventually to a more informed, and happier, public realm. Thus, a 'good' pronouncement is an opinion that is expressed and informed by scholarship: content doesn't matter- if it is badly informed, then it will have no wider impact, but it is still better that a weak opinion gets expressed. You can't block 'bad' opinions without also rejecting of unpopular, but ultimately correct ideas. Getting the best 'impact' out of academic research, in short, is best served by as many scholars as possible openly expressing their informed opinions, even weak ones.

Against this criterion, the recent row about [Professor David Starkey's appearance](#) on Newsnight is a little surprising. Starkey provoked a wave of criticism after he made some unpalatable comments linking ethnicity, poverty and August's rioting. Starkey is without a doubt a scholar of considerable eminence. He has published both on the Monarchy in the Tudor period but also on the role of the Monarchy in the contemporary social life of the nation.

In an article in [Arts & Humanities in Higher Education](#), he argues that the monarchy played an important cultural role in the life of the nation in providing a moral compass as well as substituting for nationalism. He argues that the contemporary decline of the importance of the monarchy has left a cultural hole around which rage dangerous anti-social forces. There is clearly a *prima facie* argument to be made here that in pronouncing on ethnicity, poverty and rioting, he is drawing on his scholarly interpretation of the Monarchy and Britain. And that seems to clearly qualify his comments as exercising 'academic freedom' in a way that meets the standard of serving the public good.

It's clear his comments are out of step with the positions of many academics, even those in his own discipline of history. A content-based rebuttal or counter to his arguments by other public academics is probably in order, and would certainly be justified.

But that does not excuse attempts to prevent him from fulfilling his duty in their [call on the pages](#) of the Times Higher Education, 'to deny him the oxygen of publicity'. This is worrying trend because they seem to

seek to restrict academics' public comments to topics where they have undertaken specific research. But research today has become so specialised that this imposes an impossibly high barrier: if you only studied riots in the 1980s, well, you have nothing to useful say in current public discussions.

Of particular concern is the effect on early career researchers who are learning the norms, conventions and expectations of academic life: 20 signatories to the [letter that appeared](#) were post-graduates. The call to ban Starkey risks conveying to the next generation the belief that academics (including themselves) are only qualified to comment on issues on which they have undertaken research, thereby validating disengaged, ivory-tower behaviour.

There is a problem in a message that only 'true specialists' can comment in public: society expects researchers to be continually pronouncing upon and driving progress in public debates and discussions. Excellence in research involves having the imagination to better perceive the world than others. If you know the best way to guarantee Europe's energy security using pre-revolutionary Russian tribal politics, then your voice needs urgently to be heard.

There are many pressures on early career academics to focus very narrowly on publication, and not thinking creatively about applying their knowledge and understanding to social problems. Great effort is required to prevent early career academics from becoming discouraged about the value of their public engaging, and drawing on their imagination to create impact from their scholarship. And without that visible impact, the public's valuation and support for *all* research will be considerably diminished.

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