

HRD: Truth, linguistic warfare and positionality

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We live in an increasingly complex and polarised society. Politics, TV, radio, and social media commentary have become ideologically driven to the extent that academics can now face a hostile environment for daring to articulate a different or opposing point of view. Whether the issue is trans rights, creationism, critical race theory, COVID-19 vaccination, or another contentious topic in the culture wars, researchers and academics face a significant risk of being cancelled for holding socially unpopular views (Economist 2021; Reidy 2020). The consequences of cancellation can be significant, affecting their employment, reputation, and career progression. Universities are not immune to this phenomenon either, as some have taken robust action to silence academics who speak out against university practices, especially if it casts the institution in an unfavourable light. This seeming intolerance to dissenting voices has led some to argue that 'not all views are equally deserving of respect' (Cambridge University Reporter 2020).

In academic journal circles, there has also been much discussion around the broken peer-review system (Allen et al. 2022; Ellinger et al. 2023); whether to financially incentivise reviewers to review manuscripts (Goodman 2022); the growth of journal ranking and index factors (Wang, Gilley, and Sun 2012); the challenge of identifying artificial intelligence like ChatGPT-generated submissions (Fazackerley 2023) and the growing number of journals who are happy to publish research of dubious quality in exchange for an article-processing fee (Kennedy 2015). Amidst this context, journal editors regularly face important questions about what we publish and whether publishing articles on a specific topic privileges particular positions and viewpoints. We may see ourselves as impartial arbiters of content, shielding a discipline from being buffeted too much in one direction or another and striving to achieve balanced journal outputs.

In the prestigious UK MacTaggart lecture 2022, TV journalist Emily Matlis discussed the challenges with achieving balanced coverage on topics such as Brexit (United Kingdom leaving the European Union). She states:

'It might take our producers five minutes to find sixty economists who feared Brexit and five hours to find a sole voice who espoused it. But by the time we went on air we simply had one of each; we presented this unequal effort to our audience as balance. It wasn't. I would later learn the ungainly name for this myopic style of journalism: "both-sideism", which talks to the way it reaches a superficial balance whilst obscuring a deeper truth. At this stage, I had never heard the term, or indeed the criticism; I just thought we were doing our job'.

Arguably, it is both-sideism that causes imbalance in some debates. Dreher (2020: 2364) argues that 'a fetish for balance and the weaponisation of free speech produces both-sideism' that offers equivalency and the illusion of parity in debates and confrontations. Yet the polarisation of many media outlets often means we have become more selective in what voices we listen to. In this post-truth, polarised society, Lee (2017) argues that there is a danger that we become blind to views and information that contradicts understanding of the world (confirmation bias) and that we seek out individuals who hold beliefs similar to the ones we have (echo chamber effect). The 'battle for ideas' has become the battle for ideas that we are prepared to listen to. In short, we have stopped listening to each other.

What are the implications of both-sideism for research, academia and the field of HRD? In teaching academic writing, I have often told students to focus on producing balanced narratives, by give voice and (by implication equal weighting) to both sides of an argument. Yet, surely the more important consideration is how we reflect truth in academic argumentation, being prepared to listen to both sides, seeking out seldom-heard voices and avoiding privileging certain perspectives imbued with status and privilege. In short, there is a danger that as researchers we confuse objectivity with neutrality. Being truthful researchers sometimes requires us to take unbalanced positions that we justify through empirical research and careful thorough analysis.

One potentially fruitful avenue for opening ourselves up to new ideas is the polemic. We should not underestimate the value of a polemic for stretching our thinking, questioning our taken-for-granted assumptions and surfacing hidden truths. Polemics force us to confront difficult realities and consider viewpoints outside our comfort zones. They can give voice to marginalised communities and shine a light on dubious practice. For example, the focus of the Perspectives forum in HRDI is to bring fresh and original thinking to the fore – positions that challenge the orthodoxy and present alternative realities and approaches for consideration. Polemics are welcome and encouraged to contribute to an open and critical assessment of a diverse range of perspectives.

Another potential avenue is to consider how we perceive HRD and its role to support individuals, organisations and the society. Arguably, HRD has become a politicised concept for some time now. Yet, strong efforts are being made by scholars in the field to develop critical reflexivity that seeks to decolonise the curriculum and expose repression and subjugation forces influencing both discourse and practice. Critical HRD has been introduced to challenge the ‘resource’ performativity aspect of HRD and seeks to understand how HRD is being shaped by broader societal forces, beyond the physical and virtual walls of the organisation. Central to critical HRD approaches lies an openness to resisting aggressive argumentation and entitlement and questions both beliefs and practices that underpin how organisations and society’s functions. As editors and researchers, it is imperative that we contribute to the ongoing debate by addressing the potential implications of the prevailing intolerance towards dissenting voices on our future capacity to represent diverse perspectives impartially and inclusively.

In short, we have a responsibility to publish impactful, evidence-based research that contributes to the growth of the field, while upholding ethical integrity as a cornerstone of our editorial approach. It is our duty to identify misinformation and prevent the deliberate spread of disinformation within our journals. It is increasingly apparent that positionality plays a significant role in evaluating submissions and making publishing decisions. Therefore, we must reflect on our own biases, remain receptive to new ideas and perspectives, and steadfastly uphold the values that underpin our discipline. As noted by veteran journalist Carl Bernstein (2023), ‘the truth is not neutral’. Without truth and rigour, trust cannot be established. As editors, let us remember that truth is not synonymous with centrism but is rooted in the unwavering pursuit of excellence, aimed at retaining the valuable trust of the HRD community amidst a discordant and fractured world.

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