

Speaking Out for Science and Democracy

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We are living in unprecedented times. For decades, the world has been grappling with the major challenges of conflict and violence, violation of human rights, population displacement, alarming environmental degradation, and inequality in different forms, to name a few.

Global Challenges and Denials

Added to these, we now have to tackle the more focused challenges resulting from climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, and a gradual but noticeable shift from democracy to authoritarianism. Of course, these threats affect different countries to varying degrees of severity but, because of globalization, the impact on any one country or region may have unpredictable, global consequences.

Astonishingly, we are also witnessing a strong and articulated movement aiming at downplaying or even denying these challenges, often motivated by vested interests. This movement is gaining momentum in a world flooded with an excess of news pouring from unverified sources, rapidly spreading through social media. In fact, the so-called information disorders have thrived with the increased entropy of the internet, the lack of understanding of scientific reasoning, and the crisis facing traditional media, among other factors. Lies appear to be traveling faster than truth, and often it is hard to distinguish between facts and fake news.

Rising Autocracy

The rise in global autocracy is also a matter of grave concern. The 2021 report of the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute of the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, provides alarming signals of threats to democracy in several parts of the world. After witnessing a marked improvement in democratization during the 1970s and 1980s, Latin America and Africa are now experiencing a constant and noticeable decline of democracy over the past decade. The V-Dem report mentions a drift toward autocratization in Brazil, India, Turkey, and the United States. It specifically names those countries where democracy has declined the most over the past decade, such as Benin, Bolivia, Mauritius, and Poland.

Brazil, for example, is witnessing a clear attempt by the Bolsonaro administration to destroy the public federal higher education and science and technology system that has been built up over the past 60 years. The attacks on university autonomy, academic freedom, and science development—including fake news, threats, judicial coercions, and, ultimately, a drastic reduction in the institutions' budgets in order to limit their functional capacity—come from different and well-organized fronts. Absolute despair has pervaded the university sector, and the clear feeling is that this situation is not echoed by society at large. Although national associations of universities and science and technology have been continuously protesting and alerting the authorities concerned, the effect of these actions has been rather limited.

Similarly, in their 2021 report, Scholars at Risk (SAR), an international network of academic organizations, reported serious threats to university autonomy and freedom of speech of scholars and students in a number of countries, including Algeria, Egypt, Hong Kong, Hungary, Russia, and Turkey. The SAR report warns of the “shrinking of the space for free inquiry and discourse” in universities.

Abstract

In the face of the great challenges that humanity is facing, including the current wave of denialism and autocracy, university leaders appear to be silent. Yet, universities are vital for addressing these challenges and university leaders must show the way forward within their institutions and in society in responding to scientific and environmental misinformation. More than ever, university leaders need to speak out and cannot afford to be complacent.

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Response from Universities

Although universities are acknowledged for their vital role in addressing the great challenges facing humanity, now and in the future, this fact is usually taken for granted and the dangers of the current wave of denialism and autocracy that the world is experiencing are not fully recognized. We all watch, almost silently, the attacks to which universities are subject. The voice of universities with regard to tackling global challenges is barely audible. In particular, university leaders are failing to provide the leadership needed by their institutions and society. Their lack of response to scientific and environmental misinformation is weakening their universities, relegating the universities to being mere teaching institutions. (See also [Robert A. Scott](#), “Should University Presidents Have a Voice in Public Affairs?” in *IHE* #104).

Universities attract some of the best brains in any country, whether in terms of faculty/researchers or students. The latter will make up the taskforce that will be responsible for undertaking the difficult tasks of executing identified solutions in the future. The former are active participants in the contemporary scientific endeavor to arrive at those solutions. Science is the only path to salvation to overcome major challenges, and universities, especially research-intensive ones, are best positioned to generate solid scientific evidence to create new solutions and help form public policies. We cannot overemphasize the fundamental role that universities and science play in addressing the most pressing issues of humanity. Also, the dynamic intellectual discussions that emerge from universities are critical to shaping important advances in society, for example on issues related to equity, diversity, democracy, and sustainable development.

Considering the trust and respect that universities and their leaders have in society, we find that the expected and necessary response from the higher education sector on global challenges and democratic recession has been rather weak. In our view, the response needs to be more robust and compelling, because the future of our planet depends on it.

The main message that university leaders must persistently convey is that universities play a crucial role in addressing the major challenges threatening our global sustainable future, and can help to distinguish between fact and fiction. They need to explore new ways of communication to reach out to wider society, and properly position universities to defend science when it is denied by specific interest groups. In order to attract public support, they need to communicate their views clearly and succinctly, not merely by publishing their research findings in scholarly journals. University leaders must also encourage faculty and students on their campuses to engage in frank and open discussion on major national and global issues, urging them always to be guided by facts and empirical evidence. They must also support and protect faculty and students who stand up and speak out truthfully on important issues.

Breaking Away from the Comfort Zone

There are several factors that make university leaders remain in their apparent comfort zones. First of all, they have to deal with a myriad of internal challenges related to financial resources, faculty, students, etc., which consume most of their time and effort. In the case of publicly funded institutions, leaders perhaps fear that any view expressed contrary to government positions could lead to budgetary cuts for their institutions. Additionally, there are often diverging views within their universities on some issues, and voicing their specific opinions could create rifts on campus.

Finally, with the rise of autocracy, university leaders are reluctant to challenge the government and bring to light its undemocratic processes for fear of retribution, including political harassment and even termination of appointment in countries where leaders are politically appointed. But universities must understand that autocracy would mean the end of university autonomy and academic freedom, which all universities cherish. To shield itself from political repercussions, a university could join hands with other universities within the country or region, but it needs to speak out and cannot afford to be complacent.

University leaders must consider the perils that exist if they continue to remain silent. More than ever, it is important for them to speak out and try to break the bubbles in which their institutions are comfortably seated. ▲

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