On the Value of Fox-like Thinking, and How to Break into the Washington Policy Community

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In a famous essay, the political theorist Isaiah Berlin broke thinkers into two types: foxes and hedgehogs, drawing on a fragment from the Greek poet Archilochus: "a fox knows many things, but a hedgehog knows one big thing" (Berlin 1993).

Foxes privilege breadth over depth. They are not deep experts in any one subject, but they are able to see connections and general patterns across disparate subjects. They tend not to get fixed on any single approach or question, instead thinking and sampling widely. Hedgehogs are experts in one narrow subject. They burrow deep into a single question, invest in a big theory, and become *the* expert on some very narrow topic.

What I didn't realize when I began my PhD was how much hedgehog-like thinking had overtaken academia. Big-thinking political science of an earlier period had gotten me interested in the discipline. But as I learned the folkways of PhD-level political science, it became increasingly clear to me that prestigious academic journal article writing was the primary currency of academia, and that this was a very limiting currency. To publish in a reasonable journal, one needs to "nail" something. To "nail" something, one needs to define a very narrow question, and then go deeply. This pushes academic political scientists towards classic hedgehog-like thinking.

Worse, it pushes academic political science towards some self-enforced irrelevance. Rather than having big things to say about current events and big actionable questions, academics often focus on narrow cases where there is good data, leaving the harder questions to those with far less rigor. By marginalizing fox-like thinking, academia too often marginalizes itself.

To be fair, both modes of thinking produce their own valuable insights, and both certainly need each other. Hedgehog-like research goes deep and provides the building blocks for fox-like thinking. But fox-like thinking provides the context for hedgehog-like research, and helps to keep it connected to the larger world. Foxes also constantly out-perform hedgehogs in making predictions about the world (Tetlock 2006).

And also to be fair, things have changed a bit since I was in grad school, particularly over the last few years as political scientists have grown far more comfortable with blogging and other forms of public engagement. But several years ago, when I was figuring out how to engage in the world as a PhD, it was far harder to see a path towards publicly-engaged work inside of the academy.

MY JOURNEY

In 2007, done with my coursework, I was eager to return to Washington, where I had worked before going to grad school. I went back to DC to interview lobbyists for my dissertation, working out of the University of California's Washington, DC center. I then did a Brookings Research Fellowship, followed by an APSA Congressional Research Fellowship. Working in Congress, the comparison with academia felt particularly stark. In Congress, I often quipped, people spent very little time thinking about questions that mattered to hundreds of millions of people; in the academy, people spent lots of time thinking about questions that mattered to a few dozen people.

I learned that policy people in Washington ignored much of what academic political science produced because it was often so encrusted in its own internal debates and language as to be unapproachable to outsiders. The academy's deep investments in hedgehog-like thinking meant it had a hard time speaking the fox-thinking language of Washington policy people, who tended to be generalists.

For someone like myself, with fox-like aspirations, there was no obvious home as I finished my PhD. I didn't feel that academia was the right fit. But I worried that too much of the analysis and writing in Washington was far too general. It was fox-like, yes, but often too fox-like, lacking any sense of academic rigor. If academics are far too cautious about what counts as a defensible inference, DC policy types and writers are too often anything but.

The big opportunity for me came in 2011, when I went to the Sunlight Foundation (a DC data and transparency organization) and started doing what would be best described as "data journalism," writing short-to-medium length analyses that comprised a few key findings, primarily descriptive in nature, mostly on the topic of lobbying and money in politics.

As I began doing this writing, I soon realized there was a big space to write general interest political science-grounded essays with data. I'd put up a piece on the Sunlight Foundation blog, and it would be referenced in the Washington Post, the New York Times, Politico, etc. I was on NPR. I was working with This American Life and Planet Money on a big piece on money in politics. Reporters were calling me for comment.

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This was fun! The Sunlight Foundation was also generous enough to give me time to turn my dissertation on the growth of corporate lobbying into a book, *The Business of America is Lobbying*, which Oxford University Press published in 2015.

In writing my essays with data, I had no quasi-experimental designs, no regression discontinuities or natural experiments, nothing innovative or "clever." There was not much I could publish in an academic journal. But that was just fine with me. I felt as though I was making important descriptive observations, posing worthwhile questions (even if I didn't "nail" anything). I didn't have to spend two years navigating "peer review" only to see it finally published and therefore locked into obscurity behind a paywall. I just put what I wrote online, and if folks found my writing interesting and compelling, they'd share it, and discuss it. If not, they'd pass over it. I could participate in a policy debate in real time.

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In October 2014, I took a position as senior fellow in the political reform program at New America, a DC think tank. I now write my short, wide-ranging essays for *Vox (*on a blog called *Polyarchy)*, increasingly branching out beyond my initial expertise in lobbying and money-in-politics (becoming more of the fox I always wanted to be). I'm also getting started on a new book project that will attempt to answer the following question: if our political system were working as well as we can reasonably expect, what would that look like? It's the kind of normative, big-picture book I would never start if I were worried about tenure.

After some initial struggles, I've found this career path incredibly rewarding. But it's also clear to me that I would have never had these particular opportunities had I not done my PhD in political science. For one, getting a PhD greatly sharpened my analytical mind, teaching me how to think like a social scientist. For another, I learned not only the data skills that have been so valuable, but more deeply, I gained a love and appreciation for the power and potential of data that I didn't have before.

THE ADVICE PART

My experience has largely been in the DC policy world, and in particular, at the intersection of think tanks, advocacy, and journalism, so my advice is largely influenced by the world I now know. But with that caveat, here's my basic advice for those who want to break into the DC policy world from academia.

The first thing to know is that, unlike the academic job market, there is nothing resembling a standard pathway. One has to improvise a little, finding opportunities where they lie, and sometimes creating them where they are possible. But skills matter, and in my experience, six skills have come in particularly handy, only one of which PhD students typically acquire in their coursework.

Data Analysis

The one skill PhD programs do a good job of teaching is data analysis. A little comfort with data analysis can take you a long way in Washington, where data is often as revered as it is poorly understood.

But even here, the kind of data analysis that is valued in Washington tends to be different than what academics value. Very few folks in Washington care all that much about casual identification strategies. They care mostly about counts and trends, and basic correlations. Anything beyond that loses far more people than it impresses. Clarity is prized over cleverness.

Still, the ability to manipulate data and analyze it smartly carries a ton of weight, even if most of that analysis is primarily descriptive. Additionally, the ability to explain why others' conclusions might be spurious is also prized. There is much bad data analysis in Washington policy reports and journalism, and sometimes there is real value in explaining the many methodological flaws that sadly proliferate.

Data Visualization

Everybody likes charts and graphs. Often, when people read reports or articles, they look at the charts and graphs first. This makes sense, since we are visual creatures. By most estimates, roughly half of our brain's neural pathways are devoted to vision.

Yet, the typical PhD program devotes little to no time to teaching data visualization. While the basic data output on most statistical software packages are certainly adequate, some attention to design principles can go a long way to effectively conveying information. Taking the time to learn a design package, like ggplot in R, and picking up some basic fluency in Adobe Illustrator, is a relatively easy way to improve one's design output.

Clear and Concise Writing

In graduate school, a friendly professor once warned me that I wrote too well: nobody in academia would take me seriously. Following George Orwell's timeless advice (2010), I've always tried to avoid unnecessary jargon and cliches, and keep my sentences simple. I had been a journalist before coming to graduate school (my first job out of undergrad was a staff writer at the *Philadelphia Inquirer)*, so I valued snappy writing.

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People value clear writing in DC because their time is scarce. They don't have patience to struggle through something written to demonstrate "seriousness." They want the quick and easy-to-parse version. If you can provide that, you have an advantage.

PUBLIC SPEAKING

Academics largely communicate their work through difficult-to-parse academic papers (see above) and the occasional awkward conference presentation that contains far too many slides with far too much text ("I see we're almost out of time, so let me skip through these 10 slides and just conclude by saying…").

The Washington policy world involves many presentations, panels, and broadcast interviews. For those who can take advantage, these are great opportunities. To convey your ideas in a lively and clear presentation is a tremendous advantage. Again, one must be willing to sacrifice a certain amount of "seriousness" and somewhat simplify ideas into accessible, digestible pieces.

This is not networking. Networking is actually getting to know people, building a community of folks with shared interests, and cultivating trust and goodwill. Networks take time to build. Since many PhD students who might want a Washington policy job are not actually in DC because most universities are not in DC, a good way to start a network is over Twitter, which is widely used by Washington policy professionals and journalists. People are often surprisingly responsive on Twitter, happy to engage in back-and-forth, and even happier if you help them get their work out to a wider audience. It's a great space to build goodwill.

Big-picture, Fox-like Thinking

Finally, I get back to my original point, which is that wider-aperture thinking is valued in the Washington policy world. Often, opportunities to write and gain attention are tied to developments in the news, and the more broadly one is able to work, the more opportunities arise. The ability to be opportunistic because you can speak to a range of topics is often more valuable than the ability to specialize super-deeply.

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Building a Network

As I mentioned above, careers in Washington do not follow any standard path. Many job opportunities are not widely advertised, and even those that are widely advertised often have favored candidates with an inside track. So, it pays to have a large network.

People outside of Washington often complain that DC is a very schmoozy place, where people are always "networking." But if it feels like "networking," it means you are doing it wrong. I've had numerous conversations with friends of friends who want to know how to get a job in Washington. In a typical chat, they tell me all about themselves, then ask if I can help them find a job, as if this were purely transactional. I rarely can help them in the immediate moment, and after a conversation like that, I often wonder, why would I?

Academic departments that wish to train political science PhDs for the Washington policy world might wish to think about developing these skills. There are other ways of being a serious scholar that go beyond publishing academic journal articles. Political science could embrace some of them. The overall result would probably be more public relevance for the discipline. ■

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