
Wanted: More Effective Public Communication in Empirical International Economics

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My thesis in this chapter is that the world needs more effective public communication in empirical international economics. *Effective* means persuasively heard or read as well as spoken or written, and with tangible results. *Public communication* involves many channels, especially the serious media for policy analysis accessible to a broad range of participants and observers beyond professional economists (but not traditional pedagogy nor popular mass communication). I will argue that the need for more effective public communication is most acute for *empirical* (including historical and institutional) *international economics*.

After all, much of economics is at first blush counterintuitive and becomes sensible (however subtly) only with patience, practice, and constant articulation, communication, and reminder. Even sophisticated commentators and policy practitioners often muddle “comparative advantage” and “competitive advantage.” And both bilateral and overall trade deficits are castigated as national problems, while it is generally well understood that interpersonal trade imbalances and personal borrowing can be innocuous or even beneficial.

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International economics—historical, institutional, and empirical—is still more relentlessly abused and misunderstood. Even well-educated publics often seem to think that buying and spending everything as locally as possible promises stable prosperity, romantically embracing Gandhi’s *swaraj* unawares. They need exposure to the massive historical evidence to the contrary.¹ And even sensible politicians mislead themselves as well as gullible followers with the notion that exports, imports, and jobs may all be controlled according to popular intuition. In contrast, even simple scatter plots show that across countries and over time, measured exports and imports covary in a tight, positive way—and that there is virtually *no* covariation in trade surpluses, deficits, and unemployment rates.²

So the world needs more effective public communication in empirical international economics *especially*.

A Brief Personal Retrospective

I began my career in 1970 at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, where everyone was nurtured in the “Wisconsin Idea” that “the boundaries of the University are the boundaries of the state.” This meant that Madison’s ivory towers ought to somehow demonstrably serve the state’s citizens and government.³ The Wisconsin Idea was vaguely appealing to me back then, but, of course, the uppermost challenges were getting my research right, getting it noticed, and getting it published. Little did I anticipate that the need to “get my research right” was soon to be supplemented by a need to “make my research relevant.”

My first direct contact with Fred Bergsten and the new Institute came in the early 1980s, during an institutional competition for a distinctive experimental National Science Foundation grant. The grant was unique in mandating international economic research that was demonstrably rele-

1. See Maddison (1995, 2001, 2004); Williamson (2006); Aghion and Williamson (1998); O’Rourke and Williamson (1999); and Bordo, Taylor, and Williamson (2003).

2. The first correlation is the real-world counterpart of the Lerner Symmetry Theorem, which is readily demonstrated in a “general-equilibrium perspective.” That same general-equilibrium perspective likewise undergirds the absence of the second correlation—in reality, market-clearing *failures* in a nation’s labor markets are only rarely, loosely, and at best temporarily influenced by export-import imbalances. One need only consider how a company like GE profitably allocates its resources and workers across its many input activities, products, and multinational facilities. The answer is more provocatively simple than one might think: GE uses GE—General Electric uses general equilibrium—both within its company “boundaries” and in exporting to and importing from “other” companies, just as a country should and as smart countries do.

3. Trechter (2005) provides a recent retrospective and forward-looking assessment of the “Wisconsin Idea.” Other references to the Wisconsin Idea, starting with McCarthy’s (1912) seminal book, can be found at www.legis.state.wi.us (accessed May 22, 2006).

vant to the policy community. The National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) team (for which the late William H. Branson and I were coprincipal investigators) won the micro-side competition. This led to a reorientation of my work toward policy relevance, including learning the names and reputations of Washington insiders on international economic policy and listening to them for suggestions on creative research ideas and on the most pressing research needs.

About 10 years later, Fred Bergsten offered me a special opportunity to combine my academic career with a two-year, part-time arrangement with the Institute, where I was able to hone my knowledge and skills as an international economist and as an effective public communicator.⁴ Those two years mushroomed to 13 and to a personal link between academic and policy pursuits that continues to this day.

Public Payoffs and Professional Methods for Public Communication

With experience in both academic research and public policy analysis, I have a particular perspective from which to address the issue of what would enable more effective public communication of key ideas and results in international economics. What sets best-practice examples apart from otherwise commendable efforts to influence public understanding of key issues in applied international economics is precisely the policy entrepreneurship and public marketing epitomized by C. Fred Bergsten (and the theme of Michael Mussa's overview for this volume). It is these characteristics that have added the *demonstrability*, if not always the definitive persuasiveness, to the work of Institute researchers.

An example helps to clarify and amplify this point. Marvelously insightful, policy-relevant research on the virtues of outward orientation for development was carried out in the 1970s by Jagdish N. Bhagwati, Anne O. Krueger, and a stellar cast of associates.⁵ But this work had limited impact because of the lack of powerful human or institutional catalysts to advance it. In contrast, cogently argued policy analyses from the Institute that focus on key international economic policy issues at or even before

4. I have not been alone in commuting between academics and the Institute; Mac Destler, Randall Henning, and Catherine Mann maintain such relationships. Numerous academics have had part-time arrangements with the Institute or have contributed to the Institute's work from off-site.

5. Bhagwati (1978) and Krueger (1978) distill the common and unique lessons from 10 matched book-length country case studies, authored by themselves, Robert E. Baldwin, Jere R. Behrman, Carlos Diaz-Alejandro, Albert Fishlow, Bent Hansen, J. Clark Leith, and Michael Michaely, among other luminaries.

the moment of decision making—in a manner that is easily understandable to decision makers—can and do have large impacts.

Beyond the role of such policy analysis in promoting desirable economic reforms, it is important not to underestimate the prophylactic payoff from combating pseudo-analysis that might move the United States and its trading partners in the wrong direction. Well-researched, well-documented, comprehensive, and engaging research is the natural survivor *and* the natural enforcer in the policy realm, especially when authors are able to effectively present their findings and recommendations in testimony, press briefings, and more generally in the nonprint media. The successive Institute volumes on sanctions are an excellent illustration, choking off sweeping, feel-good expressions of righteous indignation in the United States and “smartening up” the effectiveness of global sanctions.⁶ John Williamson’s many and meticulous contributions to the political economy of “reform,” usually outward-oriented reform (in accord with the so-called Washington Consensus), were for a time just as successful.⁷ Recently, however, Williamson’s wisdom has been flying into strong headwinds from the increasingly well-organized skeptics of “merely” economic development and of “merely” commercial globalization. Howard Lewis and my 2001 attempt to vividly communicate the evolutionary and fitness benefits for American workers, firms, and communities of cross-border engagement in investment, exports, *or* imports was intended as a prophylactic for misunderstanding and nonsense but so far has failed to gain adequate traction.

The cautionary lesson from these examples is that communication vacuums get filled perversely by anecdotal evocation at best and “junk science” at worst. Not at all minor among the reasons for committing to more effective public communication by professionally competent applied international economists is to minimize encroachment by self-taught experts and “pop intellectuals.” The world of policy discourse and practice needs far less globo-babble, either by inscrutable economists unschooled in public communication or by addled pretenders.

But how? What are the methods by which international economists might pursue more effective public communication? I have several favored techniques.

- ***Communications Artistry.*** There is a real art to mastering the communications culture of public intellectuals—achieving the intersecting mix of contacts, trust, interactive attentiveness, and memorable cogency

6. The Institute’s sanctions work includes that of Gary Clyde Hufbauer, Jeffrey J. Schott, and Kimberly Ann Elliott (Hufbauer, Schott, and Elliott 1990, forthcoming). Richardson (1993) isolated an especially large effect from national security export controls and broadened the benefit-cost apparatus of the sanctions project to calculate the antiexport bias (“cost”) in a number of American regulatory areas.

7. Especially Williamson (1990, 1994) and Kuczynski and Williamson (2003).

that goes into effective communication, compounded in the case of international affairs by cultural and lingual nuance. Like many performance arts, it requires long practice and ongoing mentorship. No one masters this communications mix better than Fred Bergsten, and he has mentored his colleagues in it assiduously, from publishing in *Foreign Affairs* and on the op-ed pages of the *Financial Times* and *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* to testimony, radio and TV appearances, and in sanctioned and shadow experts groups imagining the benefits and costs of Pacific-Atlanticism, a new American “competitiveness agenda,” or inclusive variations on the G-7.

- **Communications Attentiveness.** Effective public communication generally requires understanding other people’s points of view and the bases for any misunderstandings they may harbor. Attentiveness thus implies good listening skills. Many of my Institute colleagues are exemplars of these skills⁸ but no one more so than Fred Bergsten, who has a unique capacity to explain and refine the concerns of the policy community. He illustrates commendably the skill Paul Krugman once described in his own life as “listening to the Gentiles.”
- **Turf Transfer.** Effective communication across cultures often necessitates some measure of “turf transfer.” Fred and the Institute have always encouraged periodic leaves by senior staff for “public” positions, including positions abroad and in international institutions, and they have also temporarily welcomed journalists and policymakers onto the Institute research staff.⁹ I would suggest greater turf transfer with academic institutions, by attracting academics on leave or sabbatical to spend time at Institute and encouraging virtually *all* Institute senior fellows to take leave for visiting academic positions at research-oriented universities.
- **“Double Writing.”** A single research product is almost never suitable for *all* audiences. But it often takes little effort to rewrite suitable peer-reviewed publications for an elite, public policy community.¹⁰ For example, in the Globalization Balance Sheet project, the 2001 books by Lori G. Kletzer and by Kenneth J. Scheve and Matthew J. Slaughter el-

8. My work with Monty Graham (1997a, 1997b) on multilateral competition policy for the Institute is, I believe, one example of both communications attentiveness and communications artistry.

9. John Williamson (1994) writes about the political economic value of “techno-pols”—technocrat-politicians, people with both technical expertise *and* political sensitivity. That is ideally what this sort of think-tank/public-sphere turf transfer foments. John credits Jorge Dominguez with coining the term.

10. It takes much more effort to rewrite peer-reviewed material for a broad audience. For one successful effort, see Lindert (2004a, 2004b), who says he wrote volume 1 “for human beings,” and volume 2 for “social scientists” (2004a, xv).

egantly illustrate double writing, even to the point of extending their Institute research in unique directions that are not found in the work of their peer-reviewed counterparts.¹¹

- ***Vignettes and Stories.*** Every audience has another audience. If effective writing communicates with an elite public audience, then they can usually translate it into forms suitable for their own audiences—constituents, clients, members of Congress, readers of newspapers, etc. Through this mechanism, “double writing” can become “redouble writing,” spilling over from its initial target audience as far as possible toward popular reception.¹²

A Mixed Assessment

Pursuing effective public communication in empirical international economics can be extremely satisfying professionally. But, as others have also found, it is difficult to do the public policy communication while also remaining active in peer-reviewed research, mentoring successful doctoral dissertators, and helping to build academic excellence at a university. So I have some cautionary advice for the like-minded:

- ***Timing and Specialization.*** “For everything, there is a season.” Under current custom, it is probably still advisable to spend at least 15 years after a doctoral degree fairly exclusively on peer-reviewed research, with only occasional “double writing” oriented toward economic policy. Were “custom” to change, however, including a more flexible conception of academic tenure, then I would enthusiastically welcome the idea that more empirical economists would spend an entire career specializing in public communication in international economics.
- ***Seduction.*** For an effective public communicator, the great temptation is the ironic mantle of “public intellectual.” Unfortunately, some of the most widely acknowledged public intellectuals have abandoned their

11. Keith Maskus’ (2000) Institute book also illustrates this handsomely. Marc Noland has the most sustained and successful record of double writing among Institute senior staff in my opinion. My impression is that several of the Institute books written under external contract by political scientists accomplish the same double-writing service, but I have not endeavored to find out.

12. In this spirit I began experimenting with interviews of real people in real stories in the real cases that were complementary to the serious empirics in my research. These vignettes appeared as sidebars in the *Why!* series (Richardson and Rindal 1995, 1996; Lewis and Richardson 2001), paying special attention to their rhetorical value. Especially in the earlier monographs, these anecdotal sidebars drew many new target readers into the serious statistical evidence that most types of global engagement could be beneficial to American workers, firms, and communities.

academic connections and accountability entirely, thereby blurring the line between scholarly discipline and public celebrity. Here is where a think tank with the root commitments of the Institute can be a close substitute for academic community and responsibility—as long as it retains membership in the professional, scholarly fold.

Closing Thoughts

Successes and exemplars notwithstanding, international economists still face a serious problem with effective public communication of their most important ideas—a problem that is probably becoming more severe. The work of the economists that is most admired for its penetrating “method” often exhibits little clear relevance to those who work in the real world of international commerce and policy. And much of the work that I most admire for its wise evaluation of real-world issues pays little attention to penetrating method. The desirable center on this continuum is too sparsely populated and perhaps even emptying.

With this problem, how can the American government and the governments of other countries sustain best-practice international economic policy? And, even if they could do so administratively, how could they politically if their ill-informed constituents and media fail to understand the requirements for and benefits of sound international economic policies?

Think tanks have burgeoned in the past few decades, but those in the Institute’s and Fred Bergsten’s image have not grown fast enough. May their tribe increase!

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