Advocating for universities in the public arena

I would like to argue that public advocacy needs journalists. We are the medium through which the message reaches a broader audience – both the general community who ultimately sway political sentiment and the people in power who make decisions about policy, funding and the overarching policy architecture that hopefully guides the country to a new future.

I’m sure I don’t need to talk at length about the future. Digital disruption, the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the gig economy, increasing casualisation both in our own sector and more generally. How the sector teaches and what it researches are fundamental to how the country responds and adapts.

But journalists are treated with suspicion and sometimes derision.

Journalists are seen by the sector as both enablers and the enemy. But I would argue we are a force for good, even when the coverage is counter to the prevailing wisdom of sector leaders. Good journalism forces debate, it calls for transparency and accountability, it challenges the status quo.

But journalists themselves are not advocates, although sometimes there is pressure for them to be so – the spin the party line, so to speak. Journalists see the world from a very different perspective and sometimes this causes conflict and distrust.

There is no doubt that universities are one of Australia’s great strengths. Everyone in this room would agree with that. And it’s true. So why does the sector feel in such a precarious position at the moment?

Just a few examples: in January, an Australian Industry Group report found that more than a quarter of the ­nation’s graduates said their degree was close to useless for their job they were doing.

In May, a report from consultancy firm EY added to the already contested debate about the value of higher education, asserting that half of existing university degrees could be obsolete within a decade leaving graduates with “more debt and poor job prospects”.

The Group of Eight told a conference in Shanghai last November that universities were facing “a tide of community and political hostility”.

Last month radio talkback host Alan Jones told a then brand-new education Minister Dan Tehan: “I think this is the worst portfolio in government. This is the toughest job and, to be honest with you, I’m not sure anything can be done. I think the horse has bolted.”

We have seen truckloads of coverage on possible Chinese government interference on university campuses and the very real risk of IP theft.

Every week it seems there are negative articles about freedom of speech, vice-chancellors’ salaries, rising costs to government and return on investment for both students and taxpayers.

And, let’s not forget the ongoing screaming match about entry standards, especially in regard to teacher education courses.

And then there was the debacle over the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation …

To put it plainly, universities appear to be in under a barrage of metaphysical and political pain.

It’s not to say some of this criticism is not justified. It is.

But it is also symptomatic of the world in which we live: an era of short attention spans and click bait, Twitter-enhanced echo chambers and constant bickering and screaming matches between a hyper-partisan commentariat.

Attacked by the Right over freedom of speech, rising costs to taxpayers, and questionable graduate outcomes, universities are also attacked from the Left for being elitist, managerialist, neoliberalist and for abandoning the old academic ways.

It seems like universities are stuck between a rock and a hard place. And there’s plenty of space for good public advocacy between those two points on the compass.

The question before us is: should vice-chancellors and other university leaders be more vocal in their defence of the sector as a whole.

There’s no question that vice-chancellors are willing to fight tooth and nail in the public arena for their own institutions at any sign of threat or negativity.

Meanwhile while lobby groups and peak groups offer opposition to anything that hurts the interests of their wider group of members.

But I put to you that most university leaders, and certainly university chancellors, rarely step onto the public stage to argue the case for the sector more generally. One wonders if this influential group of individuals would have a positive impact on public perceptions.

There’s not a lot of research on public perceptions of universities or if indeed those perceptions are changing as the system massifies and morphs into institutions that would have been unrecognisable just a few decades ago.

In 2013, UA conducted a survey that found 80% of people were broadly positive about universities. Only, 4 per cent were either strongly or mildly negative. That’s heartening.

A soon-to-be released poll from Universities UK, however, has come up with profoundly different results finding widespread apathy among the UK population. The same is true in the US but there massive student debts and worthless qualifications from for-profit providers intensify the debate.

Unsurprisingly, the UUK report finds that positive attitudes are strongly correlated to levels of education and civic involvement.

Writing in Wonkhe, the online publication for which I am currently working, Richard Brabner, head of an outfit called the UPP Foundation writes: “These findings clearly demonstrate to the entire sector that we must do much more to convince the public of the value of universities. This is in part a communications challenge.”

Brabner asserts, as do many others, that when the “public know what universities do, there is a sharp increase in the numbers who have a positive view of the sector”.

This is not in the least surprising. Universities are massive, complex, internationally engaged institutions. I understand that a lot of people, even many who have a degree, do not fully understand the extent of the work and reach and importance of university teaching and research.

But most universities have industrial-scale divisions or units solely focused on producing and pushing out positive coverage – press releases, videos, social media, podcasts, TV channels and more. It’s a bit like Willy Wonka’s Chocolate Factory.

Universities don’t have a problem with pushing out the positive stories. There are plenty of them. Every morning I listen to the news and hear about new discoveries that will either change the world or enhance our understanding of our current one.

This is good news. Certainly, the media is increasingly dependent on this steady stream of ready-made content.

An interesting exercise was undertaken by UTS researchers and students a few years ago whereby they analysed some 2200 stories across 10 Australian newspapers over a one-week period to see if they were initiated by public relations or promotions, or whether they were original work. Here's what came out in the wash.

The study found that nearly 55% of stories analysed were driven by some form of public relations -- a media release, a public relations professional or some other form of promotion.

Articles were identified across the Australian print media in which journalists put their by-line on stories that were republished press releases with little or no significant extra journalism work. That’s scary. Right.

Of the various sectors or rounds, the sector which had by far the lowest level of PR influenced coverage was, interestingly, politics. The researchers found about 37% of political stories could be traced back to public relations however, they noted that much of the PR machinations goes on behind the scenes through journalists’ relationships with politicians and their advisers and for that reason is harder to identify.

The highest levels of PR content were found in the innovation/technology (77%). Education was 63%.

I offer up this study merely as an insight into how the worlds of journalism and public relations are getting increasingly blurred and how it’s the 37% of non-PR driven articles that are most likely to cause communications managers and vice-chancellors grief.

I suppose this is the point: that universities can’t engage effectively in public advocacy without the media. But that presents as a double-edged sword. As already mentioned, the media is both an enabler and the enemy, depending on the issue of the day and how that issue is interpreted by the journalists who are covering it.

My point is this: that effective public advocacy more often or not requires good relationships with good journalists. Some of us can be trusted. We can contemplate and decipher difficult ideas. And we can make up our own minds.

But I would argue that among some sections of the sector there is a fortress mentality. Journalists are kept at an arms length. They are only brought into the fold on pre-packaged, vacuum sealed, low nutrient content.

It doesn’t leave a lot of room for negotiation when events take an unexpected turn in direction.