

The Edge of Academe

Brian Cantwell Smith — June 7, 2011

I • Intro

A. Challenge

1. The challenge is whether, if a young new McLuhan were to grow up now—turn up as a graduate student, or set out as young faculty member—would he have a place at the university?
2. Would he be given the chance to succeed?
3. Or more demandingly
 - a. What if someone came up with his brilliance, but without his spin, his verve for PR, his ear for the sound bite, w/out his dashing surface?
 - b. Would such a person have a place ... even a place on the edge?
4. Can contemporary academia nourish genuine, idiosyncratic, brilliance?

B. State

1. We are here, in part, to celebrate McLuhan
 - a. To recognize his uncanny exploitation of simultaneously being within, and being without, the academy
 - b. Concretely symbolized by his legendary, iconoclastic Coach House—an incredibly modest physical structure that stood witness to his life on the edge.
 - i. Rag tag garage on St. Michael's campus
2. My worry, though, is that his was an unrepeatably experience.
3. More specifically:
 - a. I am gravely concerned about the state of academy...
 - b. And about the future of...well, let's call it, in honour of tonight's topic...*that which is "edgy"*:
4. Not just life on the boundary of the university
5. But intellectual life that pushes the boundaries of our understanding

C. Here's a way to make the point vivid

1. I heard a talk, many years ago, on the demise of the monasteries
2. About how it was socially unimaginable that monasteries would not hold their vaunted social place...
 - a. ... Until they didn't
3. The speaker spoke not a word about the obvious analogy
4. But it was an academic audience
5. And there was a chill through the room

II • Plot

A. Intro

1. My aim is not to be a wet blanket—or merely to sing a song of lamentation
2. I just want to join a conversation on what to do about it
3. But first—and unusually, and with some apology—I want to say a word about my own background
 - a. Mostly because the remarks I am going to make, far more than in most academic talks, arise out of my own particular experience.
 - b. I hope these experiences are unusual—but my worry is that they're not.

B. Background

1. I grew up as what is called an “academic brat”—child of an inveterate academic
 - a. First at McGill, then at Harvard
 - b. Ultimately getting a PhD in the Artificial Intelligence Laboratory at MIT
 - c. Instead of following in the family footsteps, though, I went to work in the heart of Silicon Valley
 - i. Specifically, at Xerox PARC, home of the personal computer, ethernet, windows, etc.
 - ii. For 15 years I worked in an amazing hot-bed of socio-technical innovation.
 - iii. Though, I confess, on the side teaching computer science and philosophy at Stanford.
2. 15 years ago, left PARC to move into academic life full time.
 - a. At Indiana

- b. Then at Duke
 - c. Then (back home) to Canada.
- C. Mandate
1. When I came to U.of.T, I was very explicitly assigned three jobs by the then-Provost (who, as many of you know, was fired soon after I arrived).
 - a. [1] To help the University make the transition...
 - i. From a “marks on paper” university
 - ii. To one where the substrate of creative and intellectual expression and communication rested on new forms of digital configuration (fixed, fluid, & flexible)
 - b. [2] To help the University in understanding, and responding appropriately to, the rise of interdisciplinarity
 - i. I had spent the previous 30 years of my life running interdisciplinary research teams, involving researchers from across the breadth of science, engineering, social science, and humanities
 - ii. More on this in a moment
 - c. [3] To serve as Dean of the Faculty of Information
 2. Report
 - a. I believe I did a reasonable job of the 3rd assignment
 - b. But as I told President Naylor, prior to stepping down in 2008, I entirely failed on the first two.
 - i. Obviously I could have done a better job
 - ii. And someone better could have done more
 - c. But this is not about me
 - d. The reason I stepped down is because I came to the (sad) conclusion that the other two things couldn't be done.
 - e. At least they couldn't be done
 - i. In the public university—at least the public university in Canada
 - ii. At the moment—i.e., in the financial, bureaucratic, institutionalized university of the early 21st c.
 - iii. At anything like the speed at which they needed to be done, if we weren't to fall further behind the intense pace of change.

III • Transition

- A. Plato
 1. In the *Phaedrus*, 25 centuries ago, Plato worried about the transition from an oral to a written society
 2. Whether the advent of writing would lead to benefits (such as democracy, and rescuing education from the grip of a ruling didactic class)
 3. Or whether, by destroying memory, it would evacuate the citizenry of wisdom.
- B. In spite of the hype, there are profound reasons to think that the socio-technical transformations society is currently undergoing are as profound as what happened 25 centuries ago.
- C. Example
 1. Ian Wilson, former librarian-archivist of Canada, tells a story about asking a group of seventy-year-olds and a group of teenagers who was the first Prime Minister of Canada
 2. According to the story, most of the elderly knew, and almost none of the young people
 3. 60 seconds later, though, every one of the young people knew, and all of them knew more than any of the seventy-year olds.
 - a. Enmeshed with his DCB entry, his portraits, his letters, and a wealth of secondary literature.
 - b. It is a haunting example. Maybe knowing things is passé.
 4. What would it be to conceive an *epistemology of seasoned judgment* where knowing facts was viewed as an inefficient use of brain cells?
- D. Very quickly, I want to recount a dozen representative examples of some experiences I had at as a Dean U.of.T, of the sort that have undermined my confidence that the public university is nimble enough to navigate these epistemic shoals.

IV • A Dozen Examples

- A. [1]: Strategy
 1. At my very first meeting with the Provost, after arriving at U.of.T, I asked where conversations took place

- about overall academic strategy
- a. About what profiles of expertise and personnel would be appropriate for a 21st century university
 - b. About what departments, schools, degrees, requirements, etc., a contemporary university was going to need in a digital era of online courses, etc.
2. The Provost laughed.
 3. It's a serious point
 4. Strategy
 - a. In corporate research endeavours (and Lord knows I'm not advocating modelling the university on corporations; in fact that is exactly why I *left* the corporate world) there tend to be 3 different groups of people
 - i. Researchers
 - ii. Managers
 - iii. Administrators
 - b. Managers: like
 - c. When I first came to work in Universities I was stunned that there were only faculty and administration.
 5. I am absolutely not suggesting that there should be a cadre of people in the university who "tell others what to do".
 6. But it does not follow from that important point that the university can afford *not to consider its overall intellectual strategy*.
 - 7.
- B. [2]: Bottom up
1. Constantly, over the 5 years I was Dean, I was told that all such issues of academic strategy, academic initiatives, etc., had to emerge "bottom up," rather than "top down"
 2. This is such a deeply held belief it is often equated with *academic freedom*—with the right and the good
 3. Another thing I told David Naylor was that if I allowed the strategic Plan of the Faculty of Information to emerge bottom-up, it would languish as a second-rate school forever.
 4. Not because there aren't great faculty members there
 5. But because vision, leadership, chutzpah, etc., are more like "middle-out" phenomena.
 6. An excessive fetishization of "bottom up" initiatives will vitiate genuine innovation.
- C. [3]: Collectivity / Joint responsibility (P&D)
1. At an early meeting of Principals & Deans, it was announced that each Dean would meet with the Provost to go over the budget for their unit
 2. I made a suggestion that that seemed like a very "radial" form of responsibility—that if we were collectively responsible for the stewardship of the intellectual mission of the university, shouldn't we agree *together* on the allocation of funds—so that if I had a faculty member who wanted to know why the budget of Arts & Science was 40 times larger than that of our small faculty, I could say "that's what we decided".
 - a. I.e., I wanted to be able to say
 - i. Not: *they* get a lot more money than we do
 - ii. But: we decided that it is appropriate for the university to put more money there.
 3. Two things, that is, struck me as most important for the Deans as a group
 - a. That we take the "uni" in "university seriously"; and
 - b. That we operate as a "we"
 - c. Not as an *iterated itinerary of i's*...
 4. After the meeting, three different Deans took me aside and suggested it was stunningly unwise for me to propose such a thing.
- D. [4]: Going out of business
1. Something else I said (and David Naylor would remember): that interdisciplinary units would be reviewed after 5 years—and if successful, would be renewed; if not, would be closed down
 2. I asked why it couldn't be the case that the opposite would be true: that if they were successful, they could be closed down (because they had achieved their goals), but if they had failed, they would have to be continued
 - a. Cf. CRMA at Stanford—on computer music

- b. Faculty of Information—should be dismantled in 30 years.
 - i. Has neither a distinctive subject matter, nor a distinctive method, nor a canon of literature
 - ii. Absolutely essential—but only diachronically, as a “change agent” in the academy
 - iii. Information schools should have served their purpose
 - iv. (We don’t, after all, have departments of written studies”)
- E. **5** : Peer-reviewed journals
 - 1. Big meeting in Ottawa (hosted by Library Archive Canada) on peer-reviewed journals
 - 2. I suggested that the very idea of peer-reviewed journals was anachronistic
 - a. Warrant had accrued to the point of publishing
 - b. But publishing is now free
 - c. Why not separate publishing and peer-review entirely
 - d. Might work as follows
 - i. Warrants...
 - e. There was sustained applause
 - f. And then the meeting went back to the business as usual. The point wasn’t referred to again, and had no impact whatsoever.
- F. **6** : Tenure
 - 1. When I worked at Xerox, we effectively had a system of tenure (converting term to permanent positions)
 - 2. Someone came up for tenure
 - a. I wrote a memo (successfully) saying that we should give this person a permanent job
 - b. Even though I had never seen this person do any work.
 - 3. But:
 - a. Every group they were part of asked deep questions, got along famously, got projects done in time, etc.
 - b. Other groups were fractious, distracted, etc.
 - c. If I moved this person from one group to another, the first one grew fractious, and the second one coalesced...
 - 4. Imagine writing a tenure letter
 - 5. Yet cf. major coaches of sports teams—Phil Jackson of Chicago Bulls
 - 6. Supposed to be a great *department*—yet we reiterate the same criteria
 - a. Philosophy: just listed yesterday as 7th
- G. **7** : Disciplinarity & its discontents
 - 1. Cf. cognitive science, & science studies
 - 2. A fundamental assumption at U.of.T (I have heard this stated over and over again)
 - a. Interdisciplinary programs must be founded on the disciplines
 - b. This is an incredibly conservative commitment, which I believe will keep U.of.T from the forefront of the great universities of the future.
 - 3. Example
 - a. U.of.T has extraordinary strengths in the cognitive sciences
 - b. Not one of the best dozen cognitive science programs in north america or Britain has emerged solely “from the bottom up”
 - c. I have been involved in a number of hires, etc.,
 - d. But it is fatal
 - 4. Not the only case
 - a. Cf. communication, or science studies, or other programs...
- H. **8** : Interdisciplinarity II: The end of methodology...
 - 1. “Interdisciplinarity” is hugely trendy
 - 2. But the wrong word
 - 3. Rather: demise of disciplines as methodologically-individuated loci of expertise
 - 4. Problems complex enough that they require
 - 5. Standard story
 - a. ... Not musicology on iPhone; pharmacology on Queen St.

- b. ... “End of Meth”
- I. [9] : Software (e.g., Sakai vs. Microsoft Exchange)
 1. Another major debate that took place over the past 5 years had to do with university IT strategy, and in particular support for online course management software
 2. Blackboard, I’ve heard, spent on the order of \$5M in promotion in order to secure the U.of.T contract.
 3. Various other open-source alternatives didn’t have a chance.
 4. A number of us were in favour of reconfiguring the presuppositions behind the whole enterprise
 - a. Recognizing (as the Mellon Foundation has recognized) that taking responsibility for the stewardship of academic content is *itself a priority for the academic community*
 - b. Not “research”—more like *development*. But who is going to shoulder development that has the academy’s interests at heart?
 - c. May require a reconfiguration of the university as an institution
 - d. (The next year, before the decision was made, those people who were pushing this agenda discovered they were no longer on the committee.)
 5. In passing: I am worried that, wrt IT, U.of.T (and many public universities) are progressing *more slowly than the society of which they are a part*—leading them to fall ever further behind..
- J. [10] : Budget model
 1. Five years ago or so, U.of.T adopted a “new budget model”, in which each academic faculty was treated as a “cost centre”—with revenues, expenses, etc.
 - a. Some odd things: it was recommended to those of us who were small that this was indeed the best way to organize; yet it was not adopted within the large faculties
 - b. I stood against this—I believe it is antithetical to the underlying values of the university—particular those reflected in that prefix “uni”.
 2. New budget model was of course adopted, and I know that many consider it a great success.
 3. But moral has eroded in the last 5 years
 4. ... Stories ...
- K. [11] : Laboratory for the humanities
 1. Here’s another idea.
 2. Time was, science got laboratories, ostensibly for the equipment (clean rooms, air-conditioned, power, etc.)
 3. It has come to be recognized, though, that laboratories are far more than *rooms*
 4. They play an absolutely essential socio-intellectual role in the development of what the tri-councils are pleased to call “high quality personnel”
 5. Lab meetings; a place that everyone comes
 6. *Small publics* ⇐ standard story
 7. I.e., why not have laboratories in the humanities?
 8. Here’s an idea of what to do with the McLuhan Coach house
 - a. View it is a laboratory for discursive engagement.
 - b. We did in fact propose this, in a major CFI grant.
 - c. External reviews were fabulous
 - d. CFI turned it down; saying they knew the reviewers were positive, but they (CFI) didn’t believe them
 - e. And anyway, they said, it sounded like social science.
- L. [12] : Peer review
 1. For more than 20 years, I have explicitly taught peer review in both undergraduate and graduate courses.
 2. Funny stories
 - a. “Absolute crap” to a student two rows over, whom they wanted to ask out
 - b. Trust, small publics (again),
 3. But cf. interdisciplinarity: what is it to review radically multi-disciplinary proposals?

- a. This should be an *intellectual* issue
- b. Why don't we teach this as part of what a university?

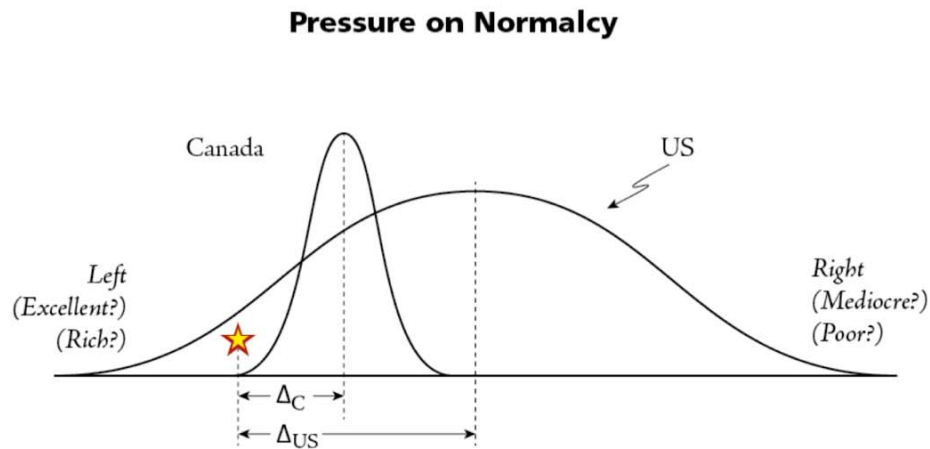


Figure 1 — Canadian pressure on normalcy

V • Discussion

A. Transition

1. [1] These are just **structural** examples—about university operations
2. I could easily mention another dozen examples; and I suspect everyone in this room could add their own.
3. [2] Finances
 - a. There are financial challenges, for example—which I haven't even mentioned
 - b. Many times, as Dean, I felt as if I was the chief financial officer of the Soviet Union in 1983.
 - c. But the challenges go deeper, I believe, than those of dollars.
4. [3] Plus a huge number of **qualitative** issues that are just as important—if more familiar
 - a. Nourishment for inquisitive wonder
 - b. How to foster a context of friendship, inquiry,
 - c. Support for ultimate questions...
5. [4] Reduction of bureaucracy
 - a. The extent to which U.of.T (and, from my colleagues elsewhere in Canada, all across Canada) are drowned in bureaucracy is absolutely stunning.

B. Consequences

1. Moreover, these issues they are affecting morale...
2. *Just this very morning*, in fact, I talked to a professor in the parking lot, over at 100 Spadina ("Hogwarts").
 - a. He was discouraged, too; said "it just isn't like what it used to be like"
 - b. I mentioned some of these examples—and his reaction was: "Oh, I could contribute 100 more:."
3. Students leaving
 - a. Graduate students (best I've ever had: has decided not to pursue a job)
4. Faculty leaving
 - a. Perhaps the smartest I hired; quit the university after 4 years, because it wasn't a place that he could work with students and pursue intellectual interests

C. Is this Canada? (see figure 1)

VI • What can be done?

- A. Institutions
 - 1. How does initiative and innovation arise, in institutions throughout society?
 - 2. Take another example from industry: the infamous role of start-ups
 - a. ... Slides
 - 3. Where are the start-ups (figure 2)
 - 4. Serious discussion about the changing epistemology of knowledge & education
- B. This is where McLuhan Coach House is interesting
 - 1. Garage on the St. Mike's campus
 - 2. Reminds me of the legendary garages of Silicon Valley
 - 3. Can we renew it—without killing it through bureaucratic oversight?
 - a. I thought so
 - b. But now it is an EDU:C—with an executive committee, accountability, etc.
 - c. Almost guarantee that it won't be edgy, won't be idiosyncratic, won't be brilliant! (◆)
- C. Wonder: can we exploit this year of Mc100 to imagine a better way?

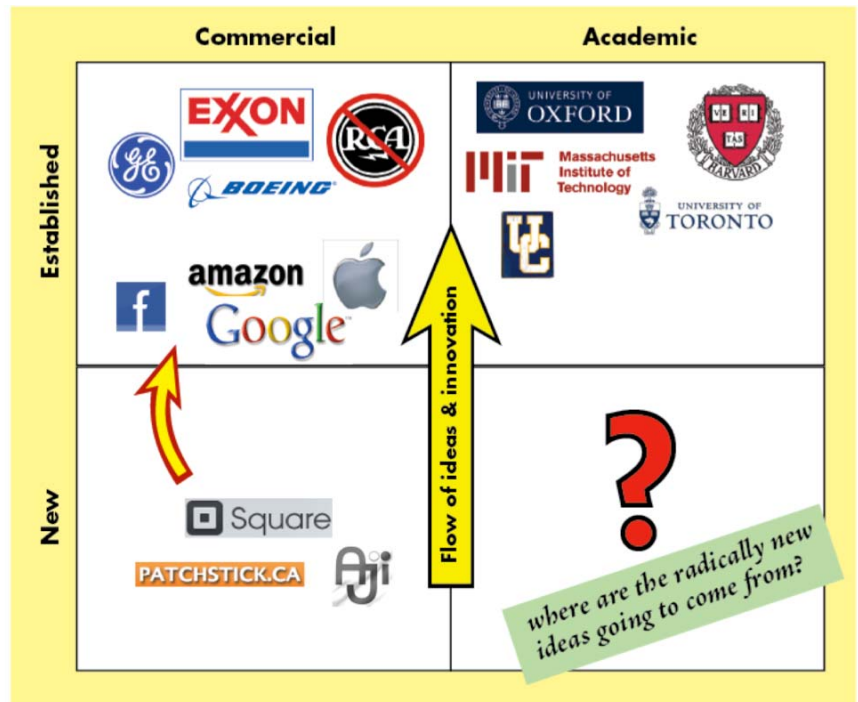


Figure 2 — Where are the academic start-ups?