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

Lee Drutman, New America

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.
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.

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 it should, we’d participate in a policy debate in real time.

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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 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.

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.
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.

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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.

REFERENCES
The Initiative for Policy Dialogue (IPD) brings together the top voices in development to address some of the most pressing and controversial debates in economic policy today. The IPD book series approaches topics such as capital market liberalization, macroeconomics, environmental economics, and trade policy from a balanced perspective, presenting alternatives and analyzing their consequences on the basis of the best available research. Written in a language accessible to policymakers and civil society, this series How Washington Should Think About Power. By Hillary Clinton. November/December 2020. The foreign policy community understandably focused on how new trade agreements would cement alliances and extend American influence in developing countries. Democrats should have been more willing to hit the brakes on new trade agreements when Republicans obstructed efforts to support workers, create jobs, and invest in hard-hit communities at home. The air force sank so much time and money into the project that turning back became unthinkable, especially since the F-35 is the only fifth-generation aircraft currently being manufactured in the United States. What does bother me is how so many political talking heads and competing news organizations have singled out Fox. They've decided that politics and ratings wars are more important than getting out the real news we so desperately need. America is hurting right now, and it looks like we are all in for a tough slog in the days and weeks ahead. The last thing we need is more hypocritical criticism and finger-pointing. Ed Schafer is the former governor of North Dakota and secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Foxes occupy a unique place among Animal Stereotypes. They can be good guys, bad guys, or completely neutral, but they're always crafty, clever, and cunning. Their sly nature sometimes results in illegal activities, so it's not uncommon to see them portrayed as thieves or con-artists. Although, it is not unknown for them to be too clever; another term for Too Clever by Half is “outfoxing yourself”. Sometimes this trope invoked under the phrase “crazy like a fox” for when the brilliant plan seems crazy. Are these policies and programmes flexible enough in the light of changing social values and cultural conditions? First, defining sustainability, a value-based goal for how we think the world should be, which requires community discussion. Second, choosing indicators of sustainability, as defined, and objectively measuring them to find out how the world is.