

Disciplinary Bubbles

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Here's another blog post that's long overdue. There seems to be a surge of interest in the topic lately, so I thought I'd write up my longstanding thoughts.

The academy is often thought of as the ideal for developing knowledge: select the brightest minds in the country, guarantee them jobs, allow them all the resources they need to research anything, don't interfere with any of their conclusions. On some issues, these independent-minded academics form a consensus and we tend to give their consensus very heavy weight. They can't all be wrong, can they?

And yet, in my empirical research, I find they very often are. A short blog post is no place to do a careful study, but I can mention some examples. The classic works in industrial relations turn out to be complete hoaxes, yet they've dominated the teach of the field for over half a century. (See [Alex Carey's book](#) for details.) In political science, the most respected practioner's most famous work shades and distorts his own findings to support a theory wildly at odds with the facts. (See [Who Really Rules?](#)) The whole field of fMRI studies are so flat-out ridiculous that journal articles are even [making jokes about them](#). And, maybe most blatantly today, economics was dominated by a paradigm that believed substantive unemployment was impossible, despite that notion having been famously and thoroughly debunked by Keynes and, of course, reality.

How is this possible? I think the key, as in most institutional studies, is that of the filter. To become a professor of X, one must first spend several years receiving an undergraduate major in X, then several more years going to graduate school in X, then perhaps work as a postdoc or adjunct for a bit, before getting a tenure-track position and working like mad to make enough of a dent in the field of X to be seen as deserving of a prominent permanent position. When your time is called, a panel of existing professors of X passes judgment on your work to decide if it passes muster. Can you imagine a better procedure for forcing impressionable young minds to believe crazy things?

And so this process forms what I call disciplinary bubbles. Take the case of industrial relations for a moment. The field was largely created by the Rockefellers, who wanted research into how they could get rid of their unions. They paid lavishly and, not surprisingly, found people who told them what they wanted to hear: that treating workers nicely made unions unnecessary and companies more efficient. The studies were completely bogus but the people who conducted them were hailed as heroes, and provided with lavish funding to continue their research. The funding started new departments which trained new proteges, each of whom was taught that the founding studies as gospel.

They were told to work on expanding and refining the results, not results, not questioning then, and so they did, becoming industrial relations professors in their own right and continuing the cycle.

Like other bubbles, disciplinary bubbles are difficult to pop. Imagine you do research outside their incorrect assumptions. Your research will simply be marginalized and ignored — you don't get into the conferences or the journals, it's just not seen as valid work. And even if you try to disprove the bogus assumptions, you get ignored. Everyone already in the field has built their careers on those assumptions. They've long rationalized them to themselves; nobody is going to support someone who argues their life's work is built on sand.

Thus ignorance marches on.