Whither the Public Lecture?
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Introduction

In this 2024 Gresham College Provost's Lecture, I will consider the public lecture, the very essence of the College's purpose. I will review a little of its history and ask if the public lecture, especially in its one-hour form, still has a role in this digital age and what that future might be.

You might consider it self-indulgent to give a public lecture about public lectures in an institution that has been committed to delivering public lectures for over 400 years, but society has changed massively since Sir Thomas Gresham endowed the College at the end of the 16th Century. The digital revolution of recent decades has altered the way in which 'educational' content can be delivered, and made institutions consider the potential of widening or growing their own audience. There is an obvious attraction in moving from an audience constrained in size by the walls of a venue, to one limited only by access to appropriate technology.

History

Let me first define my terms. What is meant by a 'public lecture'? Various definitions exist. Simply, it is '*a speech that is open to the public*'. Better perhaps, is this description; '*a presentation to the public designed to deliver information or explain ideas*'. Or, as Kieth and Lundberg describe it[1], as communication—

- The transfer of ideas from the speaker to the audience through the medium of speech, (but it is)-
- A passive method of learning.
- There is little interaction, and it clearly provides one person's interpretation of the subject or data available.

The word public is derived from the Latin *publicus* and means something like '*open to the people as a whole*,' notably it does not imply a specific, targeted subset of a population.

Evidence derived from cave paintings and petroglyphs, from anthropological studies, linguistic analysis and mythology and legends suggests that in prehistoric times information was exchanged largely by storytelling, thus perhaps the earliest form of public speaking, however small that public might have been. Maybe implying that these early communications had anything much to do with public lectures is stretching it a bit, but it the evidence also suggests the importance and indeed the power of the **narrative arc** – the thread which runs through all the best public lectures providing coherence and a logical journey through the topic. The painted images might also portend the additional value of PowerPoint or Keynote!

Public *speaking* obviously has a long history and is concerned usually with the art of persuasion. Whilst a public *lecture* must clearly involve public speaking, it is not the same thing as we will see. The first lectures were probably delivered in the major temples of ancient Egypt throughout the Old Kingdom (2686 -

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[1] Kieth W, Lundberg C.2014. Creating *a History for Public Speaking Instruction. Rhetoric and Public Affairs;*17:1;139-146

2181BCE). These temples were the universities of their day, acting as centres of both religious education and as bases for learning. Priests and scribes would pass on their knowledge and beliefs to their students, but also to the wider public at religious ceremonies and festivals.

These experiences in public speaking were developed into a structured treatise in the Precepts of Ptahhotep in about 2500BCE. The date is challenged, and there were other authors of precepts, but Ptahhotep defined a 'Principle of Free Speech". The Egyptians considered *eloquence* to be an innate faculty improvable by instruction[2]. **Eloquence is a craft**. In Ptahhotep's own words, **"I**f *you want to endure in the mouth of those who hear (you) (i.e., to make a lasting reputation), then listen, and speak (only) after you have become a craftsman. If you speak to perfection, every project of yours will attain its goal".*

This was a couple of thousand years before Aristotle wrote his famous book "*Rhetoric*" with its own guide to effective public speaking[3]. Aristotle defined the art of rhetoric as the capacity of discerning what is persuasive and what is not[4]. He was concerned with nor only engaging an audience in dialectic discourse, but also with understanding the relationship between speaker and audience. There were three kinds of setting for rhetoric in ancient Greece; *epideictic (display), deliberative and judicial.* The 'public lecture' is part of the 'epideictic' branch[5]. Aristotle's practical advice is perhaps most relevant to the persuasive speeches of politics and the law but is of clear use in the delivery of a public lecture through the successful application of *logos, ethos,* and *pathos*.

The relationship between speaker and audience is a vital thread passing through the history of the public lecture. That said, Aristotle was sometimes pretty scathing about a mass audience, which he described as having '*a corrupt and depraved character*' with '*limited intellectual capacities*' and '*moral insufficiencies*.' He was much more complimentary about audiences engaged in 'learning proper', which, of course, refers to a Gresham audience!

The art of public speaking was further evolved (and indeed codified) in ancient Rome by Cicero, in his 5 canons of successful rhetoric: *invention, arrangement, style, memory and delivery*. These are undoubtedly good bases for some sort of scoring system!

Quintilian (35 -100 AD), a Spaniard who had been sent to Rome to study rhetoric under Domitius Afer', wrote a major work, the 12-volume textbook on rhetoric called 'Institutio Oratoria.' In that work, he defined a successful orator as "*a good man speaking well*", and "*a good man as one who works for the good of the people and the prosperity of society*". I think this description matches the philanthropic vision of Gresham professors over the years.

More recognisable public lectures occurred in religious institutions in the Middle Ages following the traditions of ancient Egypt. Formal lecturing as teaching or sophisticated seminars were delivered in churches, seminaries and other religious institutions but largely to 'closed' audiences of students and those in training. For example, in the wonderfully named House of Wisdom! This was the name given to The Abassid Library in Baghdad which became a public academy at the beginning of the 9th century under the sponsorship of the visionary caliph Al-Ma'mun, widening its educational reach[6].

Lectures began to flourish from the 12th century, as universities were established across Europe. Wonderful lecture theatres were built. Like the glorious anatomy lecture theatre in Padova (where I discovered, when I was shown around, that members of the public did sneak in to watch demonstrations), or the Aula de Fray de Leon lecture theatre in Salamanca.

Lectures across the universities of Europe were concerned with Art, Law, Medicine, Theology. And were usually delivered to clergy and members of the ruling classes. In the today's parlance, the elite. Definitely

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[2] Fox, VM; *Ancient Egyptian Rhetoric; 1983.Rhetorica:1;1:pp9-22*

[3] Aristotle was part of a much larger debate about the nature of rhetoric, and others were writing about it both before and after him.

[4] Rapp, Christophe; *The Nature and Goals of Rhetoric pp 579 -596; in A Companion to Aristotle, Ed. Anagnostopoulos, G 2009 Blackwell Publishing*

[5] I am grateful to Professor Melissa Lane (Gresham Professor of Rhetoric) for educating me about these types of rhetoric and their role. The epideictic branch of rhetoric typically included funeral orations, like Pericles' Funeral Oration in Thucydides. This was a civic mode of uniting a citizenry, so a bit different from a public lecture as it has evolved today.

[6] Jim Al-Khalili (2011). "5: The House of Wisdom". *The House of Wisdom: How Arabic Science Saved Ancient Knowledge and Gave Us the Renaissance.* Penguin Publishing Group. p. 53. ISBN 978-1101476239.

not Aristotle's 'mass audience'.

Enter Sir Thomas Gresham. I will not repeat the history of the college, which is well described on our website and elsewhere, but what is important is that Sir Thomas clearly wished to democratise education, first by erecting his college in London, secondly by making the lectures open to the public, thirdly by making them free to view and fourthly by having them delivered, preferably, in English, rather than Latin. The academic had been released from his/her gilded cage.

Thomas Gresham's desire to democratise learning, ticked along in a relatively low-key way, until the 19thC when the 'popular' lecture took off on both sides of the Atlantic. The public lecture became a big thing. In a comprehensive review[7] of the rise of the 'popular' lecture in mid-nineteenth century America, Donald M Scott describes an American society with 'an insatiable craving for useful knowledge'. In the society of the time, both speaker and audience alike had to create or improvise a career, since structures of education and training were either incomplete or transient. It was a 'competitive jungle'. Delivering popular lectures was a way to carve out such a niche, and attending lectures was seen as a way 'getting a hold on life or career'[8]. Public lectures were a resource.

From around 1830, in towns and cities, particularly in the Northern US, lecture societies were formed with local people inviting speakers to educate the Populace. Lecturers delivered either one off or series of talks. Some larger cities formed **Lyceums** in the classical tradition to present them. National pride was invoked. In 1857, in Putnam's Monthly, this was said:

> "*The Lyceum is the American Theatre. It is the one institution in which we take our nose out of the hands of our English prototypes – the English we are always ridiculing and always following – and go alone. The consequence is; that is a great success. It has founded a new profession*".

A wide range of topics was covered and speakers, initially local, soon became regional and then national figures, delivering many talks around the country in different, often large, venues. Lectures were widely, and prominently, advertised and, after delivery they were reported in depth in newspapers throughout the country.

Speakers were lawyers, physicians, clergymen, professors in academic institutions, journalists, publicists, reformers and littérateurs. Clearly some were using the platform they were offered for the traditional *persuasive* aspect of rhetoric. And almost all had some form of oratorical training or experience.

Putnam's was proved correct; a new and lucrative profession had been created. Entry to lectures was charged and lecturers could (and did) command significant fees. By the early 1850s, local speakers were receiving \$15-25 plus expenses, but the most noted were getting \$50 to \$100. This would be about \$2-4000 now. By the 1880s top earners were charging \$4000 per lecture (about \$123,000 today). If, as some did, they were giving over a hundred lectures per year, we can reasonably surmise that they were doing quite well!

We see such fees being paid today, via speakers' agencies, to media stars, sportsmen, ex-politicians and wellness gurus – but rarely to academics. And, sadly, certainly not at Gresham!

Audiences, all in person, were huge for the time. By the 1850s around 400,000 people per week attended public lectures. The age range was from mid-teens to the 60s and from all walks of life, although predominantly urban. There was a strong desire for '*useful knowledge*' to get that hold on life. Almost all knowledge was seen as useful. And this knowledge was more than facts, which could be found in books in libraries. Audiences came because speakers were putting what they knew into context, and in as entertaining a way as possible; they were putting on a performance.

To be successful, there clearly must have been a chemistry between speaker and audience. The importance of face-to-face contact, and some sort of relationship with the speaker cannot be underestimated. Audiences turned up to be near an authority who might in some way change or even improve their lives, not only teach them facts. The speaker usually arrived with energy to put into the room but drew more from the audience as it (hopefully) responded. The energy was amplified, and visible as enthusiasm. I don't think much has changed today for a successful lecture.

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[7] Donald M. Scott *The Popular Lecture and the Creation of a Public in mid-Nineteenth Century America;* 1980: J American Hist;66(4);791-809.
[8] Buck, SJ; *Selections from the Diary of Lucien C Boynton 1835-1853*; Proc Amer Antiquarian Soc; n.s.43, Oct 1933;329-80

Public lectures were of course not just limited to the US. The tradition was firmly established in the UK, through places like Gresham, the Royal Society and the Royal Institution as well as Lit. and Phil. societies throughout the country. Naturally, they were all live and in-person, face to face events.

Technology

Technological advances in communication threatened to change all that, with the advent of radio, followed by television and more recently the internet and the consequent ability to watch recorded material at one's leisure.

I remember when live streaming was begun at Gresham earlier this century. I thought it was a great idea, and innovative. In fact, we were well over 100 years late! Live streaming actually became available in the 1890s (almost 30 years before the introduction of Radio), with the development of the Electrophone, distributed via the telephone system on a subscription basis[9]. A similar product was available in France, more romantically called the Theatrophone.

Theatre, music, church services and lectures (especially scientific ones) were relayed expensively to dedicated rooms or to people's homes to be heard on individual headsets.

The first radio programme was broadcast from Pittsburgh in 1920 (by Westinghouse, covering the Harding-Cox election), and the educational potential of radio was recognised almost immediately. There was a rapid expansion not only of radio receivers in homes, but also in classrooms. Radio provided 'textbooks in the air' to guide children through the curriculum. Radio provided a means of delivering more radical, innovative content than was available in textbooks[10] or, indeed, in the classroom. What was broadcast were not lectures, but specifically *designed* content for the medium of radio for a specific and defined audience. They were not recordings of public lectures.

Even the BBC Reith lectures which began in 1948 with Bertrand Russell were at first studio 'talks', and only in recent years has there been a live audience. Radio was a medium in its own right, yet the importance of the live audience was eventually recognised, and lectures on radio currently form a key part of the output of many NPR stations in the US.

Recent history is dominated by the expansion of the Internet and interactive technology as a means of communication, of distribution and as a marketplace. Indeed, one of my predecessors, Professor Peter Nailor, reflecting on the importance of the *distribution* of Gresham lectures, said in his 1991 Gresham Provost's Lecture[11];

> *"Lectures are like other forms of good intelligence; what we have to take into account of is not only the substance of the material itself in the way it is delivered, but the ways in which it is disseminated".* Nailor adapted Francis Bacon's adage about prosperity. *"Lecture material and money are both like muck, 'not good except they be spread'*.

However, many scholars have argued that the rapid development of digital technologies has rendered the lecture, as a means of teaching students, obsolete. As an example, these are the words of 2002 of Diana Laurillard[12], Professor of Learning with Digital Technologies at UCL.

> *"the lecture is profoundly defective, inefficient and outmoded"*

> *"it is suited only to what is elegant or pleasing rather than what is difficult or complex"*

The knowledge which used to be contained first in the minds of clerics and, later, on the pages of books is now freely available at the click of a mouse. That knowledge is accessible in various other forms; the written word, the spoken word (via podcasts and archived radio material) and video as filmed lectures, demonstrations or animations.

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[9] https://www.britishtelephones.com/electrophone.htm

[10] Lindgren, A.(2004) Radio encyclopaedia of children and childhood in history and society (2);707-709

[11] Appendix 1 in Chartres, R and Vermont D 1998 *A Brief History of Gresham College*; Gresham College, London1998

[12] Laurillard, Diana. 2002. *Rethinking University Education; a framework for the effective use of educational technology.* London, Routledge

Why would a student, nursing a hangover, get out of bed to go to a lecture when she could watch the content later at her convenience and after the paracetamol had done its job? And if you have digital access to the academic literature via a Library Portal, the information you can find can be truly up to date. During the Covid pandemic, the move to online teaching was accelerated, and universities exploited the technology to reach a wider, international audience. Attendance at lectures has not recovered in many places[13].

But, as Friesen has suggested[14], '*the practices of the lecture hall are not to be understood primarily in terms of information*'. In the early days of the lecture, the speaker simply read out established texts, ('*legere*' is the origin of the word lecture). As knowledge became more widely available, the interpretive skills, authenticity and charisma of the speaker became more important. From the late mediaeval period speakers began to be described in glowing terms for their presentational style. "Rapturous', 'fiery', 'authentic', 'animating'. People came to the lecture for the speaker as much as the content; to be present in the room with someone inspiring.

Today's lecturer has a range of tools available to enhance their delivery and add a little theatre. We have moved on from the blackboard, through the flip chart, the epidiascope, the overhead projector and dedicated 35mm slide-making departments in teaching institutions. I am old enough to remember all those transitions, and spent many nights typing in large font, or using Letraset, photographing to make negatives and then colouring the resultant transparencies by hand. The thought of making a mistake was horrifying. And then worrying that I would drop, or forget, the carousel.

The ability to use PowerPoint, Keynote, Prezi, and other tools on one's own laptop has been a welcome revolution, although there are disadvantages in being able to modify content at the last minute…nothing ever seems quite finished.

The Public Lecture is not the same as a lecture to one's peers, (in which case it is often esoteric or competitive) or to students (when it is likely to be curriculum-based). A lecture to students forms but part of a series of methods to ensure the student is taught and subsequently assessed. Measurement of the effect of any teaching method is challenging, and complex. If you want to read more about this, then look at the methods in the reference below[15], but it is established that for student *teaching,* forms of *active learning* involving student participation are more effective than the conventional lecture.

But in a public lecture the speakers are not there to *assess* the audience. Rather, you (the audience) are there to satisfy your curiosity and to assess us (the speakers). To vote with your metaphorical feet or to applaud.

The people who speak at Gresham College have *chosen* to give public lectures, outside their universities, and in their own time. I asked them why, and they were kind enough to tell me. Here are of some their responses.

- I find my subject interesting and I find the discipline of turning it into a condensed form accessible to a non-specialist public a stimulating one. And I just enjoy doing it. Fundamentally it's because I care about my material.
- It is an opportunity to develop a theme over a full hour, and then over a series, allowing for more complex interlocking ideas than can be managed in shorts.
- I like putting lectures together, too, as it sharpens my own mind especially if dealing with a topic that is not absolutely central to my experience.
- To inform, excite, stimulate, educate, widen perspectives, promote questions, foster lively minds, entertain, liberate, challenge, open new doors, culture, encourage, provide an outlet destination for the lonely, make people feel part of a community, train (occasionally, in some subjects), *ad infinitum.*

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[13] https://www.theguardian.com/education/article/2024/may/28/i-see-little-point-uk-university-students-on-why-attendance-has-plummeted

[14] Friesen, N. 2014. A Brief History of the Lecture; a multi-media analysis. MedienPedagogic;24 (30 Sept) 136-153. https://doi.org/10.21240/mpaed/24/2014.09.30.X.

[15] Goller M, Kyndt E, Paloniemi S, Damsa C. (eds). 2022. Methods for researching professional learning and development. Springer Nature Switzerland

- It is a great way of forcing oneself to think through difficult questions and then present in a clear and coherent way. It concentrates the mind. Equally, it is a way of presenting ideas from recent work to a different audience than one that would read a long book.
- Opening people's minds to consider contentious issues from a different point of view…and give them new information.
- To share my research with a wider audience outside of the usual academic circles. (There's something special about breaking out of that insular world of academia) and connecting with people from all walks of life who are just intellectually curious.
- I felt that I had things of possible interest to say on subjects about which I knew a bit and I had no other platform from which to let them out.
- To facilitate public engagement. The more informed people are the better people can contribute to issues.

These are interesting answers, which may be summarised as '*I have something to say which I think a wider audience would find interesting or valuable*' and '*it makes me rethink my own work and how I communicate it*'. These responses certainly resonate with me; I have found preparing to lecture to a public audience about my specialism or interest personally rewarding. The idea of speaking to 'the intellectually curious' is inherently appealing. And the potential of a significant online audience, a bigger more international audience, is, of course, compelling.

Live V Online Audience

This represents one of the key considerations in anticipating the future of the public lecture. Now that we can record a lecture and distribute it online to this potentially massive audience, what is the value of delivering it to a relatively small live audience? Could not the rationale described above have been satisfied by simply delivering material to a camera?

In my view, the presence of a live audience is a critical part of the experience for the speaker, and for the quality of the ultimate 'product'. As my colleague Professor Alec Ryrie has said:

> "*The live audience gives energy, immediacy and authenticity: they don't just transform the experience for the lecturer, but they also (more subtly) enhance the experience for the online audience. There's a reason why TV shows still bother with all the expense of recording in front of a live audience.*"

All the Gresham Professors want to continue to deliver to a live audience because of that particular chemistry; to form a relationship with the audience, especially over the course of a series, and to enter into a dialogue with them, either subliminally or through Q&A.

To quote Alec Ryrie again, "*the chemistry between speaker and audience makes the online recording more vibrant, more engaging.*"

But is that just us giving preference to the *in-person* audience. Perhaps, we should give preference to the *online* audience. After all, if the number of views reported by YouTube is accurate, then that audience can be massive. For one lecture last year, the online audience was 10,000 times the in-person audience. Perhaps we should design our lectures specifically to reflect this?

Is what we record suitable for a modern and potentially fickle online audience? Is filming me standing at the podium and recording the images I present sufficient to appeal to a large audience who cannot know me, and whom currently I do not know. I can see you in the hall, but I can't see them, out there. Is what we produce here suitable to be watched on the mobile devices 60% of our online viewers use to see us?

Most of you will have seen a Gresham lecture online, and it is fundamentally not very different from what you see in this room, although the released material switches between speaker and slide at appropriate intervals. The appearance of the lecture …. speaker, podium, screen…is what it is, with little in the way of movement and rarely any props. Whilst speakers vary in their use of builds or animations in slides, it still remains a limited form compared with what we see in highly produced material as in documentaries on broadcast media. Indeed, should we consider ourselves broadcasters rather than a college? If so, do we need to become competitive in terms of production values? Professor Carolyn Roberts suggested recently "*If we can't manage this, regardless of the quality of the underlying content, we will fail when set against commercial online offerings that seem slick, and hence more 'credible'*".

We could simply convert our iconic 15thC Barnard's Inn Hall into a more sophisticated studio. Using perhaps an LED volume comprising video-wall and floor, with programmable backgrounds and environments to create an extended reality (XR) environment within which the speakers could present their material. Melissa Lane in the Academy; Chris Lintott on a moon of Saturn, Milton Mermikides on stage with Jimi Hendrix. All possible. These opportunities fit in well with Professor Richard Harvey's observation that "*the future of the lecture will be more about showing and less about telling, and that in many ways that will be very desirable*".

We must not forget, of course, that many speakers and live audiences feel that lectures are better *without* visual aids. Certainly, many of our best lectures have been given without any. As Tim Snyder said[16], "*Teaching is performance, and it is work. The screens make my job harder.*" And "*We are being tamed by the machine, dulled to one another. The American university class is yielding to the screen, to the cave, to the death principle*". Will the absence of additional visual content make the lecture less attractive online? Will extraordinary content not be viewed because it is 'minimalist'?

Whilst modern equipment and staging will take a significant amount of money, both in terms of capital and revenue, the broadcast, in-person experience, and live stream would undoubtedly be greatly enhanced. Such a development would have the additional advantage of unleashing the creativity of our speakers, especially those who have grown up with such technology. It might also I suspect be cheaper than finding a larger, more modern venue.

Alternatively, we could take the current content we record in the lecture hall and edit and produce it *post hoc* more extensively than we currently do; to make it even more 'attractive' online. We could add content, embed videos, animations, interviews and so on. This takes more money, more people and more time, and would of course delay release of the content. And raises the important question of who approves the edit; college or speaker?

The above options preserve the relationship with the live audience which we all feel is so important. But they present significant additional problems, specifically here at Gresham. In line with Thomas Gresham's will, we do not charge for our lectures, either in person or online. Money comes from our sponsors who manage Thomas Gresham's estate and wishes (the Mercer's Livery Company and the City of London), our partners, and generous individual benefactors. We would not exist without them. What we can invest depends hugely on their desires and aims, not only on what we might like to deliver.

In line with Sir Thomas Gresham's wishes, we provide access to our content without any kind of paywall. Indeed, the fact that the lectures are free to the audience is another of the great motivators for people to apply to speak here. Our professors are attracted by the lack of commercialisation, and as one described it to me '*the corruptive influence of advertising*'.

In recent years, the College has been encouraged to raise more money on its own, and so it has, but the ambition to deliver a better product will be even more expensive and funding will become even more of an issue. We do raise money from our generous supporter network, but not yet enough to meet these ambitions.

It is noteworthy that other promoters of long form content (in their case the written word) such as the Guardian, The Atlantic, The New York Times and The London Review of Books have retreated behind a very tight paywall using a subscription model. This has led to less intrusive advertising, arguably better content, a loyal following, and, in the NYT's case, more foreign correspondents than ever before.

Some are keen to increase our income from the online audience, largely because it is so much larger than the in-person audience, and the fact that the audience is largely in America, a society more familiar with the principle of small, personal 'donations for the common good', as in PBS. Is voluntary donation in conflict with Gresham's 'free lecture' ideal? Probably not. But if *content* is behind a paywall, I would argue that it probably is.

Growing the online audience has thus become a target, not only for exposing our content, but also as a potential income stream. Since the videos of our lectures are currently stored and distributed on YouTube, it is via that platform that we must achieve that target. To do that, we must 'satisfy' the YouTube algorithm (an AI supported recommendation engine that decides which videos to suggest to a particular viewer based on previous views and other algorithm-identified preferences) to make our content more attractive to people

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[16] Timothy Snyder, 2024, *On Freedom*, Bodley Head, London

using YouTube[1718].

People and organisations can make money via YouTube either through advertising (which is of course very popular with YouTube because it makes money for them) or by using such add-ons as the Patreon donation system (https://www.patreon.com/en-GB). Both challenge the 'lectures for free' principle to which Gresham has bound itself for years, and raise strong feelings, both pro and con.

The ability to manipulate the algorithm raises tensions in the relationship between the content which speakers feel is appropriate to present to an in-person audience, and the potential interests of an unseen and genuinely remote audience. There is risk here. "*By determining the audience for each piece of content that's posted, platforms sever the direct relationship between speakers and their audiences*", argue Professors Riemer and Peter of Sidney Business School[19], "*Speech is no longer organised by speaker and audience, but by algorithms.*"

We employ top academics with a gift for communication and who wish to share their ideas with a **live** audience. Should we hire different people, whose skills relate to more to the demands of the online audience watching on a screen? Or should we insist they change content and delivery in order to meet algorithmically predicted online preferences?

The algorithms look at what we watch or like and nudge us along to more of the same, or from the same source, keeping our eyes on the screen to increase, via advertising revenue, the income to the tech firm hosting the video and owning the algorithm. It is monetising confirmation bias. In the context of online lecture material, this could become an intellectual echo chamber. Is there thus a risk of losing the serendipity we associate with an eclectic range of content, or will it be enhanced by a sort of random discovery of the College and its output? This is certainly an argument that has been made for the benefit of *non-algorithmic* publishing platforms such as Substack[20].

And how should we judge the quality of a lecture? By internal quality control? By audience feedback? By audience size (as was the case in the 19th century when money changed hands - remember that these people were honing their lecture, giving it multiple times in many places until it 'worked'). By number of views, or watch time? Likes or dislikes? A lecture which does not attract a large popular online audience may still be a great lecture, have satisfied the live audience and, potentially, be important. Should a speaker be culled from the programme because of low online viewing figures, or do we laud only those with huge audiences? Should a speaker who does not use additional AV material be penalised because the online production is so minimalist?

The Provost is effectively a curator; bringing a range of potentially interesting content together for people to see or hear. Should I design a programme aimed solely at attracting online audiences or should I seek to guarantee high quality content and delivery which I hope curious people will find interesting *wherever* they are? My own view is that it remains necessary to concentrate on getting great content delivered by great speakers and then leave the marketing to experts. It takes an entirely different skill set to ensure that the lectures have the correct wrapping, branding and distribution, but I would argue that we must always strive to provide the best stuff to wrap up!

There is an inherent arrogance in just putting something out there because we think it will be of interest. Yet it seems equally odd to rely on an algorithmic signpost and the taste of an unseen, unknown audience predominantly in another country to guide our selection; by doing so might we be missing the point of wishing to inform?

As Bill Gates said in an essay in 1996[21], "Content is King". He accurately predicted the internet would become a means of content distribution, that great content would always be a winner - but that tension over modes of funding would persist, highlighting advertising and subscription as potential mechanisms. How

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[17] https://blog.hootsuite.com/how-the-youtube-algorithm-works/

[18] A brilliant and objective 2023 review of the issues surrounding algorithmic recommendation on various platforms is by Arvind Narayanan, Professor of Computer Science at Princeton University is very well worth reading https://knightcolumbia.org/content/understanding-social-media-recommendation-algorithms

[19] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cp8e4p4z97eo and Reimer, K & Peter S; J of Information Technology:2021;36(4);409-426

[20] Arvind Narayanan, 2023, https://knightcolumbia.org/content/understanding-social-media-recommendation-algorithms

[21] http://www.microsoft.com/billgates/columns/1996essay/essay960103.asp

right he was; that tension remains.

The longer form lecture (up to 1 hour) has been challenged over recent years, first by the global success of TED talks[22] and secondly by the delivery of short form video content on so many social media platforms, e.g., TikTok, Snapchat etc. The uptake of such content has led to an unchallenged assumption that especially young people have short attention spans. Professor Victoria Baines has argued in her Gresham lectures that this disparaging view is encouraged by big tech to increase the advertising income they receive. My own experience of giving long-form lectures in schools suggests that attention span is alive and kicking in young people; you just have to make the content interesting.

A secondary justification of the short form video is that information retention after a 20-minute lecture is the same as after a 50-minute lecture[23]. Whilst material can be condensed into short form video formats, and can be very effective, none lend themselves to the reasoned argument of the longer form lecture, and especially the thematic development evident in a series of lectures. Although the practice of many students to play back video recordings of lectures at faster speeds may confuse the data! Indeed, it seems playback at 1.5x speed does not negatively affect learning, attention or cognitive load[24].

Most universities now have active programmes of 'public engagement', involving delivering many public lectures each year, and actively encouraging their academics to share their knowledge with, and learn from, a more general public. Promoting accountability, social responsibility, relevance and trustworthiness. Public engagement is seen as a 'good thing'. The rationale is not dissimilar to that which is at the core of Gresham College; to inform, to inspire and to share alternative perspectives. As Professor Victoria Baines said, "*The more informed people are, the better people can contribute to issues*". And it is interesting to note that many universities used the pandemic as a rationale to use pedagogical arguments that the days of the live lecture were over and to get rid of it. Despite the theorists, it turned out that students missed them and demanded their return.

A quick scan of the Open Lectures website (https://www.open-lectures.co.uk/) and the public lecture output of most universities gives some indication of the enormous volume and range of longer form public lectures available at any time in the UK (similar sites exist in many countries). The public lecture is neither dead nor on life support. As Professor Richard Harvey said, "*No-one is claiming that Shakespeare is dead, or that Opera is dead are they? Just because something has a classic structure it does not mean it is lifeless*".

Technology is advancing rapidly, and we should exploit it when and where we can, but we should not become a slave to a particular distribution platform, governed by its own business model, for its own needs. Rather, we should continue to identify original content presented by academics at the peak of their professional careers and use whatever marketing tools are current to distribute their content as widely as possible. It is clear from this lecture that the mode of distribution is likely to change again, and perhaps quite soon.

With investment and ambition, we can make the public lecture even better, even more attractive, even more informative and deliver it to an ever-bigger, even more engaged audience. However, we are very aware that currently we are not doing enough to interact with our audience. As Professor Raghu Rau puts it,

> "*We should double down on creating a shared intellectual and human **connection** between speaker and audience. Getting the audience involved more in discussion, using multimedia in innovative ways, maybe even connecting the virtual and in-person spaces*" What Victoria Baines has called "*a shift from simple consumption of content to a connected experience*".

In considering the popular lectures of the 19th Century in America, Scott[25] described lectures as a 'rather complex form of display', with the successful lecturer being intellectually qualified to 'diffuse knowledge', expected to have original (not necessarily new) content, to be 'broad and expansive' in his or her

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[22] TED talks aren't always respected! One of my esteemed colleagues has said: - "*TED talks were on the cusp of becoming very debased - there were too many freaks, weirdos and extremists doing TED talks*".

[23] Bryner CL *Learning as a function of lecture length;* Fam Med 1995;27(6):379-82

[24] Yang X et al *Time-compressed audio, meditation, cognitive load and learning;* Educational Technology & Society 2020;23(3):16-26

[25] Donald M. Scott; *The Popular Lecture and the Creation of a Public in mid-Nineteenth Century America;* 1980: J American Hist;66(4);791-809.

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implications, rather than esoteric. The lecture should signal wisdom and general learning. Lectures should be seen as for 'the public good' displaying 'civic character' and 'a love of usefulness'. These observations remain true.

Personally, I would also like to consider the public lecture a clear demonstration of the freedom of speech. Our professors are appointed competitively on the basis of their expertise and skill in delivery. Their overall programme is approved by peer review at our Academic Board, as is the summary of each proposed topic they wish to discuss. After that, and subject only to the laws of libel, copyright and public decency, they are free to present what they wish. It is, by its nature, exciting, as Timothy Snyder, the historian and philosopher, said in his recent book, 'On Freedom'[26], "*the daring impulse of inviting a stranger to lecture may soon give way to increasing fear that something might actually be said*". I hope and trust that we will choose not to be afraid.

I conclude with another quote from a former Gresham Professor of Divinity, Professor Alec Ryrie, who delivered brilliant lectures and is well known for his ability to coin a phrase. This is what he said,

> "*The lecture is a medieval relic that stubbornly refuses to die: its rationale predates the era of print, but just as it survived print, it seems to be surviving the digital age.*"

Ladies and gentlemen, I wish to thank all the current and past Gresham Professors who have provide advice, input, criticism and, in many cases, quotations for this lecture.

It is they that create the content, they that create the magic, and they without whom the college would not exist. Because of them,

I am confident that The Public Lecture will *change*;

I am confident The Public Lecture will *improve*;

and I am confident the public lecture will *survive.*

Long Live the Public Lecture!

© Professor Martin Elliott, 2024

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[26] Timothy Snyder, 2024, *On Freedom*, Bodley Head, London