

What price free speech?

FREDERIC STANSFIELD suggests that the problem of the commercialisation of science goes deeper than David Miller and Greg Philo suggested.

AS Miller and Philo maintain in the May issue of *The Psychologist*, the commercialisation of science is indeed a pressing problem, with its associated silencing of dissent and suppression of critical intellectual thought. But its roots spread beyond the specific university interests they describe.

To begin with, corporate sponsorship of universities is nothing new. The original development of Nottingham University was largely funded by Jesse Boot, founder of the famous retail chemists. The University of Bristol was developed using money from the tobacco industry through the benevolence of the Wills family. Indeed, all the 'redbrick' universities were dependent on local patronage until the post-war growth of government funding.

Miller and Philo rightly point to the involvement of business interests in controlling the destination of government research funds since the 1980s. But again this is not new. The Schuster Panel set up by the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research after the Second World War administered public funding for applied psychology research through a committee including business people as well as trade unionists. All the same, the result for occupational psychology was

progressive research, such as Trist and Bamforth's (1951) work on teams in coalmines, along with other investigations carried out by the Tavistock Institute.

Did universities always lead? Miller and Philo's concern that universities have been silenced as a source of critical thought contains the implicit assumption that universities used to be centres for independent thinking, and that universities lead other institutions in the development of new ideas. Both these assumptions are questionable in relation to 20th century British psychology.

Broadbent (1980) recollected that the expansion of academic psychology in the 1960s led psychologists towards conceptual and theoretical interests rather than practical ones, reflecting a behaviourist orthodoxy. This retrograde climate in universities lagged behind business interest in socio-technical systems. On occasion it also ignored ideas developed within the National Health Service, such as Don Bannister's advocacy of personal construct theory (Bannister & Fransella, 1985), before it was accepted by mainstream academic psychology.

Historical reviews of occupational psychology (e.g. Shimmin & Wallis, 1994)

give prominence to non-academics as sources of major innovation. Apart from his part in setting up research funds that Miller and Philo admire, Seebohm Rowntree directly involved himself as an industrialist by appointing in his chocolate factory the first occupational psychologist and by helping to set up the National Institute of Industrial Psychology. Broadbent's (1958) seminal work on cognitive psychology can be traced back to applied experiments in the Medical Research Council's Applied Psychology Unit on communications in gun turrets.

Threats to freedom

If neither corporate investment in universities nor government influence on the direction of psychology is new, an alternative reason is needed why universities have deteriorated through restrictions on critical thought. The economic threats to freedom of expression are more complex than the increased inequality noted by Miller and Philo.

The monetarist policies adopted in the 1980s have led to information becoming a commodity. Ideas are treated as though they are finite and scarce, like physical resources, when the cost of disseminating knowledge has become negligible. The upshot is that moneyed interests seek to restrict the availability of the ideas of academics and others in order to increase their value. Corporate sponsors who commission television programmes that may cause psychological harm are working within an economic system that gives incorrect answers technically as well as morally. Economic psychologists in Britain could do more to address this problem by investigating economic theories that conflict with psychological facts.

Miller and Philo also overlook the importance of organisational behavioural issues as a constraint on the freedom of expression of academics. Broadbent's (1980) recollections of the unbalanced funding of academic psychology may be safely in the past, but the power structures



that academics climb to become involved in research administration continue.

These senior academics may have vested interests quite as much as business people brought on to funding bodies from outside. For example, experimental research that leads to the acquisition of tangible equipment and to short-term delivery of quantitative results has attractions to heads of department concerned to demonstrate research effectiveness, even if longitudinal research entailing observations and interventions in the field may be of greater ultimate benefit to society.

Lecturers measure success by the receipt of grants that largely consist of money for the short-term appointment of research staff and students. Quite apart from the poor employment conditions that result, temporary researchers and students lack freedom to develop their own ideas, but are subjugated to the ideas of the academics holding the grants.

Some of the problems of university research are ones that the organisational psychologist would predict from what we know about the lifecycle of organisations.

The notion of academic freedom arose when universities were small. As higher education has expanded, universities have become hierarchical, structured, organisations with the controls upon individual employees, including researchers, that this entails. From the point of view of research funders as well as those concerned to preserve free expression, the answer may be that universities are reaching the end of the organisational lifecycle.

Protect everybody's rights
History suggests that research to meet business needs can make major contributions to advance psychology. Contemporary tensions between commercial sponsorship and academic research could be addressed at least in part by technical changes in economic theory and practice.

By advocating independence for universities and research councils, Miller and Philo may simply be seeking to replace a moneyed elite with an intellectual elite whose results do not merit such privilege.

A better way to preserve intellectual freedom would be to protect rights of free expression for everybody – including psychologists and other professionals working in organisations outside universities as well as academics.

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