

The Hypernormalized University

Adrian Lenardic Rice University, Houston TX, USA. ajns@rice.edu



All is not normal in higher education. Political, technological, and social flux engulfs universities and those who work within them. And yet, the message I get from my university is that all is normal - normal and getting better (more normal than normal). The messaging has become more positive, as things have become less normal, and there's more of it. We now have five 'news' updates for faculty, staff and students (Rice News, Dateline Rice, @Rice, Inside Rice and, our most recent as of 2026, The Rice Innovation Newsletter). These e-magazines provide continual updates on how grand things are and how our university is helping to drive that grandness forward [1]. It's as if the outside world of the far from normal does not exist within the inner world of my university.

I've come to feel that normality is being imposed on me. It's a feeling of dissonance - experiencing disharmonious views simultaneously. A discordance. The absurdity of having the far from normal presented as normal (the Latin word *absurdus* means out of tune). The discordance goes beyond a lack of acknowledgement to a negation of acknowledgement. A Pollyanna messaging that says there is nothing to acknowledge. All is grand so just continue with what we guarantee you is the best of possible times.

What is the feeling I am feeling? The feeling of being told, by internal media, that everything is normal while its clear to anyone who looks outside that media that that is not the case (the anyone includes those who produce said media). The feeling that feeling the way I feel doesn't really matter because there is no alternative but to accept the story being told and carry on as if all is normal. Turns out it has a name: *Hypernormality*.

The term *Hypernormal* was coined by Alexei Yurchak to describe how government-controlled media, in the Soviet Union, projected a rosy view of 'reality' that everyone knew did not align with reality but went along with it, nonetheless [2]. Challenging the narrative was futile. It was easier to accept it as real even if everyone knew it was false. It was not normality but a projected normality - a *Hypernormality*. The projection was accepted as real given there seemed to be no viable alternative.

Sometimes knowing what to call something allows you to see it. The news updates and in-house media that those who attend and work at my university are getting are projecting a reality. A rose-tinted hypernormality. As the world of higher education has become far from normal, the intensity of the hypernormal projections has increased.

One of the e-updates from my university is formatted in a traditional newspaper mode. There are sections on National/International News, Local News, Trade/Professional News, and Sports. The "news" is not news in the traditional sense. What is packaged as news are links to articles that someone from my university is quoted in. The actual news content of the articles – be it good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant, important or trivial – isn't the point. The point is someone from my institution has commented on it. That shows how well we are functioning. All's good. All is normal as long as we get to comment on it.

The news my university sends us is curated. The specifics of the curation, beyond some connection to my university, is unclear. What is clear is that links to different people, from my institution, disagreeing about some news items do not appear. That would not fit a particular normality. The dissonance is not that I think my university should take a hardline, unified stand on controversial issues. The dissonance is that any controversy, anything that hints of things not being normal, is not acknowledged to begin with. This goes beyond the overtly political. It covers all things that affect higher education. As an example, the introduction of artificial intelligence (AI) into higher education and university research is charged with potential debate. That gets diffused by a single adjective added to the updates we get about how we, the university and all in it, will move forward: We are told we will all be part of *Responsible AI*. End of story. All is normal here, don't overthink it.

So why are the university powers-that-be sending continual updates that are clearly not designed to keep us informed about reality? The fact I can go to other sources for that does not remove the dissonance the question creates. The fact that I and everyone else can delete the e-updates on arrival does not remove the dissonance. These things only enhance it, as does the fact that time, money and resources go into creating these multiple e-magazine updates. What is their purpose? Why do it? Why did state media send soviet citizens continual messaging to paint a picture of normality, a sense of 'all is fine, carry on', when it was clear that all was not normal? Propaganda is a word that comes to mind. A rosier answer for universities is public relations, marketing and advertising.

The term propaganda did not always have a negative connotation. Edward Bernays, a founder of public relations (PR), titled a book on the topic 'Propaganda' [3]. Politicians and business leaders took his ideas to heart and ran with them to create the field of public

relations as we know it today. There are differences between PR and state-run propaganda, but they share the idea of manufacturing consent [4]. The opening paragraph of the book that kick started PR encapsulates the idea [3]:

The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country.

Some years later, Bernays laid it out in a single sentence [5]:

The engineering of consent is the very essence of the democratic process, the freedom to persuade and suggest.

Persuading the masses, be they national or institutional masses, is a PR move. The hypernormality I and others at my university are feeling tracks back to a PR move (in talking to colleagues at other universities, I realized it's not a localized move). As things get less normal outwardly, one can see why organizations or nations may want to persuade the masses that all is normal. Depending on settings and circumstances, it can be called propaganda or public relations.

Corporations have long seen the value of public relations. Both outwardly directed PR to sell product and inwardly directed PR to keep production moving. Sometimes workers need to be persuaded to maintain normal internal production when things on the outside stray from normal. Sometimes workers need to be persuaded that operational changes, that once would have seemed as running against the grain, are perfectly normal and necessary. Sometimes suggestions need to be made that colleagues who don't perform will be let go even if layoffs have been pre-determined. Corporate PR facilitates all of that.

As universities came to emulate corporations, they ramped up their PR. Like corporations, they know PR needs to be external and internal. As such, they have expanded their public relations departments. Herein another discordance: The principal purposes of a university, as advertised by universities themselves, are education and research but the resources spent on public relations now competes with that allotted to those purposes. My university now has a Vice President of Public Affairs – aka public relations - whose salary exceeds that of the average professor (salaries can be found on ProPublica tax disclosures). Here is an abbreviated list of some of the other positions within our public relations department:

- Vice President for Public Affairs
- Associate Vice President for Marketing and Brand Strategy
- Assistant Vice President for Strategic Communications
- Senior Director of Campus and Community Engagement
- Director of Creative Services
- Senior Editor Rice Magazine
- Senior Director of Government Relations
- Director of State Government Relations
- Director of Digital Marketing Strategy

Director of Multicultural Community Relations
Assistant Director Multicultural Community Relations
Executive Director of News and Media Relations
Director of Presidential Communications
Director of Communications for the Provost
Director of University Relations
Director of Web Experience Innovation

The list highlights a big investment in PR. The investment is bigger when we consider that public relations directed toward alumni has its own department with its own Vice President and staff.

The growth of university PR provides a lot of resources that can be mobilized to alter perceptions when deemed necessary; that can be used to create an image of the world-class university that is projected outward and inward; that can be used to create a brand and maintain an image of a background reality that the brand fits into; that can persuade all those at an institution that maintaining the brand is part of their personal responsibility.

When state run media creates a brand for a country to persuade citizens that all is normal so they will work to carry on the brand, that's propaganda. When corporations do it, it's PR. They are not at the same level of creepy but there is overlap.

As an example of overlap, I wrote the paragraph below to sound Orwellian; like something in 1984 had Big Brother been a corporation as opposed to a government:

We must apply the Big-Brother.Co brand consistently. We must convey the same personality and tone of voice with every communication with every audience, whether it's in advertising, public speeches, brochures, website copy, T-shirt designs, emails, news releases, stationary, swag, or even in our personal behaviors and attitudes.

Not as chilling as a government proclamation but a company demanding that you change your personal attitudes to conform to the corporate edict is creepy. It's not exactly conditioning you to believe that $2+2=5$ but it resides in the neighborhood.

Now a confession, I did not write the paragraph. I pulled it from a website and changed one word. Corporations issuing proclamations of employee compliance is accepted as normal. We are moving to such proclamations being normal for institutions of higher education. Here is the edict from my university:

We must apply the Rice brand consistently. We must convey the same personality and tone of voice with every communication with every audience, whether it's in advertising, public speeches, brochures, website copy, T-shirt designs, emails, news releases, stationary, swag, or even in our personal behaviors and attitudes. -
<https://brand.rice.edu/why-it-matters>

There it is, hypernormality at its finest: Your personal behaviors and attitudes are your own and, at the same time, must conform to the company brand. Totally normal. Don't

overthink it. Carry on. Here's some free T-shirts for you and the kids. Make sure to wear them on 'Show Your University Pride Fridays.'

Never is heard a discouraging word.

Carry on and maintain the brand.

"So, you should ask yourself: With every decision you make, is this good for the company?"
– Bill Lumbergh from the movie *Office Space*, written and directed by Mike Judge [6].

Having problems projecting a rosy view 'cause the outside world isn't exactly normal these days? Not to worry. Just accept our projected normality. It's appealing. It's pleasant. It's soothing. It will help you carry on with business as usual. The more we project it, the more you will take it in. If not consciously, then subliminally - advertisers don't care which one it is [7]. Still having a hard time? How's this: There's no alternative (aka TINA).

The lack of viable alternatives is a key component of hypernormality. That lack prevents a projection of normality from being challenged. One form of no alternative is the fear of being jailed (national level hyponormality) or fired (corporate/university level). But that falls short. True hypernormality is freely accepted by the masses, not imposed on them by fear tactics (e.g., loss of income). Turns out that's not that hard to do. It happens every day.

We have become conditioned to accepting all sorts of nonsense not out of fear but out of futility [7]. Futility in the face of bureaucracy works well. As bureaucracy increases, no alternative becomes real. As you wander up the chain of bureaucracy you encounter levels of disavowed responsibility: "It's not my call, it's just the new way" [8]. The quest to reach the source, the person you can say to "can we drop the phony reality", becomes a Kafkaesque journey. Add some techno bureaucracy in the form of on-line forms that must be filled out to even begin asking questions and you can create a hyper-Kafkaesque sense of futility that will make accepting hypernormality a perfectly normal thing to do.

My university now has 13 Vice Presidents [9]. Not long ago that would have been seen as ridiculous (especially in the face of rising tuition costs). Now it's normal [10]. We have also bought into third party software to help the university run 'more efficiently' (with more forms to fill out and sans human layers to navigate). Administrative growth and increased bureaucracy may not negate shared governance, but it does undermine it [11]. This allows hypernormality to creep into higher education: 'Yes, things are not normal but it's way easier to play along with the projection of normality and carry on as if all is normal' [12].

Carrying on does not necessarily mean acceptance. It does not mean that one has bought into the projection: "Sure, they are trying to sell me a normality but I aint buying." This brings up connections between hypernormality, public relations and advertising. Advertisements, in world we inhabit today, do not act as appeals to buy some product or buy into an idea. They act as reminders and reinforcers [13].

Everyone at my university can view the continual e-news updates we get the same way we view advertisements. We can see them as silly, idiotic, useless ... you name it. Critically, we don't see them as important. If we did, then we would question them. It's the perceived unimportance that allows us to take advertisements in with low cognitive involvement. This, according to those who have studied advertising and psychology, is why advertising works. It engages us in low-involvement learning and creates a sleeper effect [13,14]. The goal isn't to persuade a direct purchase or buy in but to alter perceptions about a product or an idea. For products, the sleeper activates when you're at the store or shopping online. For PR mediated ideas, it kicks in when tasks need doing or when you are in a situation that involves discussing the company brand. This makes time and money spent on bombarding us with the same ads worth it, even if view the ads with an unfixed gaze. It's also an explanation for why university PR departments continually send e-news updates, even if we, those who work at and attend the university, dismiss them as a useless waste of time and resources (I think this interpretation gives my PR department a level of respect - it implies they have deep domain knowledge that makes them good at their job).

University and corporate PR are similar but with a key difference. Inward directed corporate media is targeted at employees while for universities it is simultaneously targeted at employees and customers. As universities adopted corporate models of operations, students became customers [15]. Customer satisfaction is a priority for service industries. One might argue that satisfaction comes from the quality of the service at which point any executive leader, at a service corporation, would laugh you out of the room. Satisfaction depends on setting a mood and creating a perception in the customer's mind. What doesn't create the right mood is a sense of disagreement, debate or confusion that could disturb or be seen as confrontational, and/or anything that feels uncomfortably not normal. In the PR world of customer service, it makes sense to avoid those things. There is a similarity here to how advertisers can influence what viewers see on mass media. A quote from a book on that topic is pertinent [16]:

Advertisers will want, more generally, to avoid programs with serious complexities and disturbing controversies that interfere with the "buying mood".

Sometimes knowing what to call something allows you to see it and all it is intertwined with. The heady mix of the hypernormal combines public relations, bureaucracy, curated projections, branding and advertising. But is any of this a big deal for higher education? Does it warrant all the words I have put down. Maybe I should *get real!* and accept that this is part of the modern university [17]. It may be an annoyance, but it has no bearing on education, which is still the purpose of a university. Maybe. That said, I offer the following from Paul Lauter: "Universities teach by what they are" [18].

In the above, *what they are* is meant to be read as distinct from *what they project themselves to be*. That brings us back to a main theme: Reality vs Projections. Education is about the quest for truth. Truth and a clear view of reality. It's those things that make education different from vocational training. Maybe one never reaches truth, never gets at the big R real, but can education be called education if it undermines the ideas of truth and reality? Truth and reality are not the calling cards of public relations, branding and advertising.

What does it mean for the education of future citizens when universities become immersed in public relations, branding and advertising? What is the future of higher education when universities create a hypernormality to keep the customer happy and workers unified in projecting the brand?

In the year 2000, a fine year for futurists, Jerome Ravetz wrote an article for the journal *Futures* [19]. He laid out cultural fault-lines that, if opened, could lead to things going wrong in the coming century. The first one, *The Corruptions of Meretricity*, relates to the themes of this essay. Ravetz coined the term *meretricity*, based on the word meretricious (based on pretense; deceptively pleasing; like or relating to a prostitute). His definition of meretricity, and a line that follows, highlight the connections to this essay:

... meretricity describes a state of affairs where no statement, be it of fact or evaluation can be taken at face value; indeed, one expects all such statements to be false, and to be of interest only as evidence of the sources of payment for them. Given that advertising is now the great patron of art (in the TV commercials) as well as of sport and much culture in general, then to that extent it is undeniable that meretricity now dominates our lives.

Ravetz was concerned with the societal effects of immersing children in a world of adverts and marketing. The worry is not that children will learn to trust adverts – beyond an early age, trust in commercials declines [20]. The worry is along opposite lines. Being continually exposed to messaging that is persuasive, but openly acknowledged as not true, can condition children to a state of distrust. It may start with TV but, given the conditioning, “why should they then be expected to believe what comes from other sources.” Taking it a short step further, “why should they have any personal commitment to truth that goes beyond convenience.” No one is educated to think these ways. They are conditioned to.

I started as a professor the year the fault-lines paper was published. At that time, I saw universities as correctives to meretricity, even if I didn’t know the word (I became aware of it 20+ years later). Yes, young adults are immersed in advertising and projections of reality but the fact they entered the university means they have an interest in truth and a distaste for propaganda [21]. The university was a respite from messaging that was about mood and persuasion versus truth and reality. There was nothing near the level of advertising, branding and public relations that there is at universities today. I may have missed a few things, but I can say that, at the time I started, not acknowledging the messiness of the outside world, with its debates, disagreements and uncomfortable knowledge, in favor of projecting a rosier view, to enhance customer satisfaction and brand loyalty, would have been seen as antithetic to education. Now it’s part of universities competing in the open market. No big deal. Students come to university to secure high paying jobs. Why not keep ‘em happy along the path - you know the motto: *everybody’s happy nowadays* [22,23]. Don’t overthink it. All is normal. Better than normal. It’s hypernormal.

Hypernormalization is a sign that a fault-line has opened beyond a critical limit. Higher education, which acted as a cure to *the corruptions of meretricity*, is now palliative care. In the PR world, truth gives way to persuasion. Reality to happiness. Challenge to satisfaction

[24]. Debate, dialogue, substantive arguments, convincing versus persuading, civil discourse about uncomfortable issues all get downplayed in the curriculum [25, 26]. But hey, if future citizens don't get exposed to those things via education, they can pick 'em up on the streets – you know, in the real world [27]. Besides, none of the above matters for personal success in the real world anyway.

The real world, so the messaging goes, is strictly a world of economics [28, 29]. Everything is transactional, education included. That's normal. Universities *got real!* and dropped notions about educating citizens. Education is about high paying jobs in the real world (the real world is even trademarked [30]). The higher purpose is to be entrepreneurs and thought leaders in that real world – university PR is heavy on advertising future economic success; 'entrepreneurship' and 'leadership-training' are buzzword phrases. Marketing folks know to keep the message positive. It's all there for you. Like the ad says: Just Do It. Don't get distracted. Speak it into existence. If we tell you that you will be a thought leader, then you will be [31]. Learn the art of persuasion, the value of the right tone. Commit to your truth. Be an influencer. If needs be, fake it till you make it [32].

Professors and staff need to heed the advice above as well. Stay on brand. The PR department will help. They'll also help you see economic reality (there is no other type). Everyone in higher education has heard the messaging that universities, for economic reasons, "need to shut down certain departments because they're unpopular with students." Never mind the actual numbers or the fact administrators continue to be hired. Don't overthink it. Better to think about ways to advertise your own classes given the normality that departments who pack more students into their classes will get more funding and support (it's trademarked as the butts-in-seats budget model). Those with lower numbers will get less of the funds they need to survive [33]. The real world is a world of competition. With everyone advertising their classes, students will be able to make better informed consumer choices. Soon enough

The number of flashy fliers advertising this or that class will grow. Students will not be able to walk across campus without seeing some form of advertising. They will continually get invitations to visit various departments for free samples of what's on offer, with free pizza. Some departments will team with others to sell linked products. The number of multiple majors will grow while time to dedicate to any single major will not, but classes can be adjusted to help the customer with that. How long before a clever department takes its butts-in-seats budget bump and hires an advertising firm to sell students on their product. It will only take one clever department, and others will follow ("gotta play the game bro"). Walking the campus will be like a stroll through the mall – 40% off at the department of biology, two-for-one offer at physics, going out of business sale at philosophy [34].

The above is more representative of the real world than olde school university operations. It will better prepare students for their personal futures. It's normal. Don't overthink it. Accept the fact that perception is reality.

Lee Atwater, a political strategist, is credited with the phrase “perception is reality”. Edward Bernays likely yawned when Lee said it. It’s a PR truism that goes back to Ed [3,5]: The public’s perception of things or events is more influential than facts or substantive arguments about them. An essay about hypernormality in higher education would also have drawn a yawn from Ed – I can hear him saying “PR taking over everything is inevitable, there’s no alternative”.

Phillip K. Dick, a science fiction writer, was also interested in perception and reality. He lectured on it at, no joke, Disneyland [35]. His lecture is clear-eyed on the downsides of projected reality but also has a potential curative. Not a Pollyanna “all will be fine” curative but crack in the wall of ‘there’s no alternative.’

In his lecture, Phillip K. Dick (PKD) stated that all his work was based on his interest in two topics. The first: “What is reality?” This question is not just an intellectual exercise, or overly academic, because

... today we live in a society in which spurious realities are manufactured by the media, by governments, by big corporations, by religious groups, political groups and the electronic hardware exists by which to deliver these pseudo-worlds right into the heads of the reader, the viewer, the listener. ... So I ask, in my writing, What is real? Because unceasingly we are bombarded with pseudo-realities manufactured by very sophisticated people using very sophisticated electronic mechanisms. I do not distrust their motives; I distrust their power.

The second topic that underlies PKD’s writing is: “What constitutes the authentic human being?” We will return to this but, for now, a key aspect of the lecture is that the two topics are “really one topic”. PKD elaborates on how the two unite:

Fake realities will create fake humans. Or, fake humans will generate fake realities and then sell them to other humans, turning them, eventually, into forgeries of themselves. So we wind up with fake humans inventing fake realities and then peddling them to other fake humans.

He said these words at Disneyland in 1978, and he notes that a society that goes the way of the above becomes “a very large version of Disneyland”. You can have all the rides, but none are true.

I think almost every professor and teacher has interest in the two topics that PKD lays out (the vast majority of those I have met most certainly do). One of our goals is to help students seek the truth, seek what’s real versus a projection of reality, a marketing ploy, a veiled advert looking to sell you something, a PR stunt to keep you happy and satisfied. That goal is important to us because, in a real sense, we are helping to shape future citizens of a society we inhabit – it would be nice (not in a Pollyanna way) if those folks could be authentic human beings. We’ll return to what PKD thought an authentic human is. At this stage, we can say that it’s not a human who abandons or downplays a commitment to truth in favor of manufactured realities.

The hypernormalized university adds to the list of spurious realities. What is the message students get when universities say they're committed to truth while immersing them in curated realities designed to maintain happy and satisfied customers. The quest for truth and reality within classrooms competes with the power of the social environment that defines the branded university (Disneyland mixed with shopping mall). The battle grows harder for front-line fighters fighting the fight for education that goes beyond transactional. The PR gets cranked up and, eventually, fighters succumb to the brand. They advertise their classes as products, projecting them as superior to those of competitors. They set up social media accounts to promote their classes and departments. They make an A-grade easier to attain (a world class university is populated by A students). They shy away from debate about disputed or uncomfortable issues lest it upset even one student-customer, who will then complain to the manager (easier for the manager to reprimand the clerk than challenge the system). What is real need not be asked. It's obvious that the environment you are in, and what you experience within it, is what is real.

The above is not a pleasant end-game view for some of us, but reality need not be pleasant for all. Maybe the hypernormalized university is just another part of a reality we must all adopt and adapt to. The only thing that may stand in the way relates to that second topic of PKD's interest: The question of what makes an authentic human. His answer is

The authentic human being is one of us who instinctively knows what he should not do, and, in addition, he will balk at doing it. ... In essence, they cannot be compelled to be what they are not.

Since PDK's 1978 lecture, enhanced technology and the creativity of reality manipulators have made it harder to spot when something is being sold to us, when our perceptions are being altered or when hypernormality is being imposed. Our ethics get bypassed by making it harder to see that we are doing things antithetical to who we are. Authenticity no longer activates instinctively. When it becomes impossible to activate, then the battle against hypernormalization, meretricity, and the PR-ization of everything, education included, will be lost. If authenticity remains possible, then a chink remains in the no-alternative armor.

A 'no alternative' view takes the form of "it's the system - there's nothing I can do." It's perceived to be passive as one is not acting out. Yet, it's far from passive as it involves doing things that support the system. As no alternative thinking becomes ingrained, we miss that often there is no requirement to do things (e.g., you'll be fired if you don't). There is only persuasion. For those situations, it's only when enough people within an organization are persuaded to do something that it becomes, in effect, a requirement.

As an example, when universities impose butts-in-seats budgets there's no requirement that individuals or departments go into marketing mode to attract students. Departments and individuals are not forced to compete against each other. The option for everyone to hold to the olde school mode of providing realistic descriptions of classes remains viable (it is an alternative). It becomes unviable not by the actions of those who impose the budget but by the reactions of those subject to it. When enough individuals start selling students

on their classes, a feedback loop is activated. Others go into a 'we need to keep-up' mode. They do so because they feel that "there is no alternative". No educator I have personally met would say that a salesperson is an authentic part of who they are. And yet, a little persuasion can turn an entire university into a competitive market complete with advertising, salespersonship and the meretricity it feeds. Authenticity short-circuited. Totally normal.

A point PDK makes in his lecture is that we tend to see authenticity as a trait of heroes who take bold actions and go out to slay the dragons (in hypernormalized corporate-education speak, entrepreneurs and thought-leaders). We miss the reality that authenticity is often about non-action. Refusing to be what you are not. We miss that manufactured realities want us to take actions to support them, as we think we are not taking action. Authentic no action is what could bring them down or, at least, expose them for what they are [36].

Authentic no action was never easy. It's harder as PR becomes more effective at nudging our behavior (e.g., "I'm only advertising my class because I think students will enjoy it"). Time is required to see through spurious realities so that authenticity can be activated and, what a coincidence, time is tighter [37]. All the while, hypernormality gets baked in deeper. There was a time when few, if any, students would have felt that a customer was an authentic part of who they are when they entered a classroom. Now I fear that's not true.

Is it too late for authenticity within the university? I was not driven to write this essay with that in mind. I started writing it to help think through what I was experiencing. If it has value beyond a personal quest, quixotic perhaps, then it's not in answers but in exposing reality within projected realities; a whistle blower document that allows questions about dragons and fault-lines to be formulated. If enough of us non-heroes, non-thought leading entrepreneurs, want to fight the dragon by saying no to the dragon then we need to be able to see the dragon and modern dragons have gotten very good at disguise. Has the dragon slipped in, all too cleanly, under the guise of normality so that, even if we now see it, it's too late? I hope not but I don't know. What I can say is that if authenticity remains, it will take self-reflection, coordination and work to activate in today's environment - it can no longer be instinctive. If that proves too much, there's always the alternative.

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Notes and References

- [1] In addition to the university-wide e-newsletters, there's those that come from departments, from the deans of schools (I am in natural sciences), from administrators, now referred to as university leadership (e.g., we have 13 vice presidents at present), and from various institutes and centers that multiply across my university (we have over 50 at present). We get perpetual blasts announcing the awards faculty, staff, students, leadership and the university have won. There's even a newsletter from our financial department telling us about the innovative ways funds are being distributed, what marvelous new efficiency software has been purchased, and how great all money matters are.
- [2] Yurchack, A. (2006), *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
- [3] Bernays, E.L. (1928), *Propaganda*, Horace Liverlight Inc., New York.
Bernays' book has a chapter titled 'Propaganda for Education'. The following appears in that chapter: "The normal school should provide for the training of the educator to make him realize that his is a two-fold job: education as a teacher and education as a propagandist."
The chapter ends with this: "In the ethical sense, propaganda bears the same relation to education as to business or politics. It may be abused. It may be used to overadvertise an institution to create in the public mind artificial values. There can be no absolute guarantee against its misuse."
- [4] Ewan, S. (1996), *PR! A Social History of Spin*, Basic Books, New York.
- [5] Bernays, E.L. (1947), Engineering of Consent, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 250, 113-120.
- [6] The line is spoken by a mid-level manager to a meeting of employees. Also at the meeting are two efficiency experts sent by the company to initiate a series of layoffs. That layoffs will happen is predetermined but employees get a 'chance' to interview to keep their jobs. The work done by employees, who get fired, will be farmed out to precarious workers. If you're interested in how this connects to higher education, I recommend reading Bousquet, M. (2008), *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation*, New York University Press, New York.
- [7] We are so conditioned to advertising that advertisers don't blink at treating us like idiots. The most recent example hit me as I watched a movie on a platform that we pay monthly fees for (supposedly to avoid ads). The movie started with "This program is brought to you with limited interruptions by Drink-Me Cola" and after that there was 5-10 minutes of ads. The movie was then interrupted by ads, the amount of which didn't seem 'limited' (maybe the number of ads on network TV has increased so much that a once normal amount is now a limited amount). Telling me one thing while showing me another takes me to be an idiot or a citizen conditioned to reject the evidence of his eyes and ears. Likely a bit of both mixed in with the knowledge that there's nothing I can really do. I can try to lodge a complaint but that sends me to the futility maze of the company call-center. I can 'ignore' the ads, but advertisers still spend the money because they know what psychologists know about the power of the subliminal. As we have become conditioned to advertising what it means to ignore something has changed. It's not so much ignoring as it is acceptance in the face of no alternative. For entertainment, I acquiesced to this acceptance long ago. For education and university operations I am clearly having a harder time. That may be due to the fact I can recall that it wasn't always this way (i.e., there is an alternative). As those memories fade and new professors, staff and students come in, the hypernormal university will be uncontested reality.

- [8] Fischer, M. (2014), *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Zero Books, London.
- [9] <https://futureu.education/uncategorized/commentary-i-have-ten-vice-presidents/> and <https://zenodo.org/records/12746841>.
Here's a list of my current university Vice Presidents (VPs): 1) VP for Alumni Relations, 2) VP for Innovation, 3) VP for Academic Affairs, 4) VP for Operations, Finance & Support, 5) VP of Facilities & Capital Construction (also President of Rice Real Estate Company), 6) VP of Investment (also President of Rice Management Company), 7) VP for Global Strategy, 8) VP of Athletics, 9) VP for IT & Chief Information Officer, 10) VP for Research, 11) VP for Enrollment, 12) VP for Public Affairs, 13) VP and General Counsel (i.e., VP of Legal).
Scattered across the offices of the 13 VPs, there are 26 Associate & Assistant Vice Presidents, 34 Directors (classified as Executive Directors, Senior Directors or just Directors), and 48 Associate & Assistant Directors.
- [10] <https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/views/2026/01/07/how-many-vice-presidents-does-any-college-need-opinion> .
- [11] Ginsberg, B. (2011), *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- [12] I suspect we've all entered this mental calculus. It happens when something is wrong, or just annoying, and we can, in principle, do something about it or register complaint but we're aware that doing so involves navigating layers of processes that may lead to little in the way of negating the wrong or removing the annoyance. It may make us feel better to act but that's weighted off the time and effort we must commit to a futile cause. That sense of wasted effort can neutralize the good feeling of having spoken up. If the calculus relates to our work, then we're aware there are other things we should be doing. That sets off questioning of how to best spend our time. By a view of ethics, that goes back to Kant, entering the mental calculus means we've abandoned our ethical standards. For Kant, ethical behavior means we don't weigh good feeling, happiness, despair, wasted time or any such factors "whenever duty is in question". We act out, or we do not. By increasing the potential that we will drift into the mental calculus of "Is it worth it?", increased bureaucracy decreases the potential of acting out of a sense of duty.
- [13] Schudson, M. (2000), Advertising as Capitalist Realism, *Advertising & Society Review*, 1, doi: 10.1353/asr.2000.023.
- [14] Krugman, H.E. (1965), The Impact of Television Advertising: Learning Without Involvement, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 29, 161.
- [15] Mittelman, J.H. (2018), *Implausible Dream: The World-Class University and Repurposing Higher Education*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- [16] Herman, E.S., and Chomsky, N. (2008), *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, The Bodley Head Random House, London.
- [17] The Cambridge Dictionary defines *get real!* as an idiom that *is used for telling someone that they should try to understand the true facts of a situation and not hope for what is impossible*.
<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/get-real>
- [18] Lauter, P. (2003), Content, Culture, Character, *Works and Days*, 21.1-2, 51-56.

- [19] Ravetz, J. (2000), Fault-lines of globalized civilization, *Futures*, 32, 27-42.
The paper, to this reader, is not a prognostication but a map of warning signs; signals that a fault-line has opened and is moving toward a red-line limit beyond which its effects will be irreparable.
- [20] Robertson, T. and Rossiter (1974), Children and Commercial Persuasion: An Attribution Theory Analysis, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 1, 17.
- [21] “To save men from the morass of propaganda, in my opinion, is one of the chief aims of education ... If we are not careful, our colleges will produce a group of close-minded, unscientific, illogical propagandists, consumed with immoral acts. Be careful, brethren! Be careful, teachers!” – Martin Luther King Jr. from *The Purpose of Education*, in *Maroon Tiger* (January-February 1947).
- [22] Huxley, A. (1932), *Brave New World*, Chatto and Windus, London.
- [23] Universities, operating as businesses, compete on the market of education dollars. They need to stay ahead of the competition. A goal of PR is to make student satisfaction seem better than any ‘satisfaction’ they could have gotten at some other university. This is why university media loves to highlight how a university stands in one of the multitudes of higher education rankings (the rankings that get announced are curated by the PR department – the idea that one’s university could be low on some rankings is not normal, so those don’t get announced). Greater satisfaction means greater happiness: Everybody’s happy nowadays and you, at this university, are even happier than that.
- [24] Lukianoff, G., and Haidt, J. (2018), *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*, Penguin Press, New York.
- [25] Graff, G. (2003), *Chueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of The Mind*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London.
- [26] Curriculum addressing debate and contentious issues is not about telling students which side of an unresolved issue is ‘correct’. Just the opposite. Beyond that, reasoned and substantive argument is what every scholar/researcher does in their own field when they debate ideas with colleagues at national meeting, gatherings, in press etc. This is one of Graff’s main points – as well as teaching the foundations of a field, we should teach about what we as academics do. Doing so, across disciplines, exposes future citizens to open and civil discourse [25]. Promoting an ideology is not what Graff and others argue for – that’s not what education about argument and discourse is. If it has strayed that way, the corrective is not glossing over uncomfortable or contested issues. That may keep customers happy in the short term, but it does not serve society in the long run [24].
- [27] I’m not the first to say that substantive debate and civil discourse no longer exist in the real world or that higher education is complicit. A recommended book on the topic: Bunch, W. (2022), *After the Ivory Tower Falls: How Colleges Broke the American Dream and Blew Up Our Politics – and How to Fix It*, Harper Collins, New York.
- [28] Michaels, F.S. (2011), *Monoculture: How One Story is Changing Everything*, Red Clover Press, Toronto.
- [29] Cohen, D. and Mikaelian, A. (2021), *The Privatization of Everything*, Chelsea Green Publishing, London.
- [30] According to Trademarkia, “The Real World is a registered trademark (Registration #1884050) owned by Viacom International Inc” <https://www.trademarkia.com/the-real-world-74525597> .

- [31] Advertising and PR have commonalities with magical thinking and new age self-help books: If you want it, you can have it; Nothing stands in your way; Reality is what you make it; Say it enough times and it's true.
- [32] In defining meretricious, vocabulary.com offers the following "Have you ever heard the phrase "fake it until you make it"? That is advice that encourages you to be *meretricious*, pretending to be something you aren't, like the *meretricious* flaunting of gigantic fake diamond earrings, pretending they are real — and that you can afford them." <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/meretricious>.
- [33] With a colleague I wrote a couple of satirical articles about how university leadership could remove departments they wanted gone and make it seem that the departments were to blame (for example, how they could remove departments they viewed as "off brand"). Satire becoming reality is now normality. The articles can be found at: <https://zenodo.org/records/12746825>
- [34] <https://futureu.education/uncategorized/commentary-by-adrian-lenardic-a-wrong-em-boyo-faculty-meeting-moment/>
- [35] Dick, P.K (1978), How to Build a Universe That Doesn't Fall Apart Two Days Later, *Lecture Delivered at Disneyland*, https://philipdick.com/mirror/essays/How_to_Build_a_Universe.pdf
- [36] There is a connection here to the fictional character of Bartelby who refuses his employers request by repeating the phrase "I would prefer not to." (Melville, Herman, 1819-1891 (1995), *Bartelby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street, 1853*, Indulgence Press, Minneapolis). Since I referenced the movie Office Space [6], I was happy to find, in researching this essay, that I am not the only one who sees similarities between the movie and Melville's short story. Here's a short piece that links the two: https://www.cracked.com/article_30299_office-space-was-inspired-by-the-dude-who-wrote-moby-dick.html - a longer piece on the movies writer and director, that makes mention of the connection to Melville (as well as Kafka), can be found here: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/13/magazine/mike-judge-the-bard-of-suck.html>
- [37] Time gets tight as everyone is expected to do more: Students feel the need to have multiple majors; staff have perpetual software and procedural 'updates' to navigate; faculty must be world class researchers, publishing more papers per year and generating more grant money to stay ahead. There are also feedback loops that make us accept a tightening of time. For example, the student-as-customer model does not require that teachers be available at all hours to respond to student emails but once enough feel it is a requirement, then it's an expected part of the service and all are required to accommodate and accept the time sacrifice.