

## Research

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Once a Month, a Philosopher Uploads His  
Discipline to the World

Shawna Noel Schill for The Chronicle

"We're all doing philosophy every day," says Jack Russell Weinstein, of the U. of North Dakota, "but most people don't know what it's called."

By Jennifer Howard

Jack Russell Weinstein finds philosophy everywhere. A professor of philosophy and religion at the University of North Dakota, he has a serious academic career, focusing on the interplay of morality and economics. He describes Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* as "the world's most interesting book disguised as the world's most boring." His own most recent book, *Adam Smith's Pluralism*, was published by Yale University Press in 2013.

But Mr. Weinstein's work extends beyond the classroom and onto the airwaves. For seven years now, he's been the host of [Why? Radio](#), a monthly program on North Dakota's Prairie Public Broadcasting. It's a centerpiece of what he does as

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director of the university's [Institute for Philosophy in Public Life](#).

Mr. Weinstein's philosophy about philosophy—that it's both an academic and an extra-academic set of activities—reflects a growing awareness among humanists that they need to move beyond the rhetoric of crisis to share what they do with the wider world. In an era of never enough money, especially for the humanities, going public can be both satisfying and a survival strategy, a way to demonstrate to college administrations and state legislatures that disciplines like philosophy are worth investing in.

But to develop a public presence requires considerable effort and a willingness to learn skills other than those you learned in graduate school. "You've got to have the right supportive department chair and the right supportive dean," says Debbie Storrs, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at North Dakota and one of Mr. Weinstein's chief administrative boosters. "It's risky. Honestly, it is."

Still, for humanists, it may be a bigger risk not to look for chances to engage more broadly.

## Everyday Philosophy

For Mr. Weinstein, philosophy has always been more than an academic pursuit. A native New Yorker, he's the son of a jazz musician with a Ph.D. in mathematical logic. As an undergraduate at the State University of New York College at Plattsburgh, the younger Mr. Weinstein wrote a column called "My Philosophy" for the student newspaper.

When he moved to North Dakota, in 2001, he felt cut off from philosophical discussions but also inspired by the close connection between the state and its public university. "If UND didn't exist, the state would be completely different, and that's a very powerful experience," he says.

Why? Radio's tagline, "Philosophical Discussions About Everyday Life," sums up his desire to get away from the idea that "if you're not talking about Descartes or Foucault, you're not doing philosophy." Even a debate about baseball's pinch-hitter rules can be seen as a debate about the philosophy of the game.

"We're all doing philosophy every day," Mr. Weinstein says, "but most people don't know what it's called, and most people find the word alienating."

On air, his definition of philosophy is expansive, his selection of guests eclectic. The professor presents philosophy interpreted broadly and mingled with political science, history, social justice, and science. He comes across as someone who is learning about a topic along with the audience. Listeners can call in or email questions.

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Some of the topics, like a segment on Indian tribes as sovereign nations, touch on subjects of pressing regional as well as global interest. Others, like a segment on "performance architecture," don't seem much like philosophy at all.

He acknowledges that his definition of philosophy doesn't always sit well with academic philosophers who look askance at work that's not contained in a monograph or a journal article. One academic friend told him, "I can't do Twitter philosophy."

Measuring up to academic standards is "a huge issue, and I mitigate it by having a very traditional, respectable scholarly career," Mr. Weinstein says. "Often after a show I will say, 'Was it philosophical enough?'"

## A Bigger Platform

A growing number of radio shows and podcasts strive to give scholarly ideas a bigger platform. [BackStory](#), a public-radio show run by "the American history guys"—the historians Ed Ayers, Peter Onuf, and Brian Balogh—puts contemporary events in historical perspective; its podcast has had more than five million downloads.

[The Academic Minute](#), produced by WAMC Northeast Public Radio and hosted by Lynn Pasquerilla, president of Mount Holyoke College, invites academics to describe their research in minute-and-a-half chunks; the interviews are used as drop-in segments daily by almost 100 radio stations around the country, according to the producers. [Philosophy Talk](#) is produced on behalf of Stanford University's Humanities Outreach Initiative and hosted by two philosophy professors.

Mr. Weinstein first pitched the idea for his show as Car Talk for philosophy, recalls Bill Thomas, director of radio at Prairie Public. Why? Radio "has stirred up interest among the autodidacts in the audience," he says.

It's hard to tally on-air listeners, but online the show averages about 18,000 listeners an episode. People as far away as Australia and Iran have downloaded it, Mr. Weinstein says.

He spends a lot of time looking for grants to promote the show: "There's not a lot of money for projects like this if it doesn't come from external sources."

That may change as administrators like Ms. Storrs encourage professors to engage in more public work. The National Endowment for the Humanities just announced the [Common Good](#) initiative, which its chairman, William D. (Bro) Adams, described as intended "to provide encouragement and support to humanities scholars who wish to demonstrate the relevance of their professional interests and skills to American life."

Mr. Weinstein says philosophers need to do a better job of explaining what they do, especially if they hope to get grants and university support and to persuade students to enroll in their courses.

"It's a battle for the academic soul," he says, "and what it means to do academic work in a changing world and in the face of changing funding models."

Jennifer Howard writes about research in the humanities, publishing, and other topics. Follow her on Twitter [@JenHoward](#), or email her at [jennifer.howard@chronicle.com](mailto:jennifer.howard@chronicle.com).

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