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DISCUSSION



The decentered Ivory Tower: the search for home in a technological world

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I still recall the moment I received my acceptance letter into the doctoral program at Ohio University from Dr. David Descutner, the Graduate Director of the communication program. My acceptance was monumental. I was a first-generation, African American man, son of a steel worker from Coatesville, PA, who would continue his improbable academic journey. Enrolling into the doctoral program at Ohio University was an invitation for me to enter a world long reserved for elites and individuals who did not look like me. Looking back at that moment over 30 years ago, I should have been overwhelmed; with the benefit of naivety, however, I embraced the opportunity.

With the help of my family, we packed up my Geo Prizm and made the 7+ hour drive from Coatesville, PA to Athens, OH. I will never forget my first time arriving on the Ohio University campus—rounding the turn on Route 33, the Convocation Center emerged from the hills, a circular structure with a white dome overlooking the Hocking River that dominated the Athens skyline. This was my inaugural glimpse of the academy—a system imbued with tradition, status, discipline knowledge, and power relationships.

My first Ph.D. meeting in Lasher Hall was daunting, as each graduate student was required to introduce themselves and share their research accomplishments and interests. I summoned the confidence to say a few words about my master's thesis, which analyzed the rhetoric of President Jimmy Carter during the 1980 Olympic Boycott.¹ My comments seemed to have gained acceptance. I appeared to successfully clear my first hurdle to enter into the academy. More importantly, I was seen and heard.

This graduate student meeting was my first step toward creating an academic home—building authentic relationships with fellow graduate students and faculty who would become my life-long colleagues and friends. Since that time, in each academic position and institution I have worked, I have cultivated a sense of place within the Ivory Tower while navigating its traditions, its processes, its rhythms, its rite of passages, and its quirks. The seasons, years, colleagues, and students came and went, but the Ivory Tower remained unchanged—defined by its permanence and stability.

Our current times, however, reveal that the very foundation of higher education has cracked. The challenges facing higher education include: public skepticism toward the value of higher education, declining state and federal funding, the enrollment cliff, student debt, and student mental health (Croft, 2025; Elias, 2025). Higher education is undergoing a radical transformation, and although the Ivory Tower will survive, it will look almost nothing like its former, formidable self. The university as a physical location

for the creation of knowledge and innovation, and for the building of relationships will be reformed, since these endeavors are no longer contained to brick-and-mortar campuses.

More importantly, higher education is not immune to the pressures of our rapidly changing and highly technological world. Building more residence halls, renovating facilities, adding new sports teams, and creating new academic programs will not save the Ivory Tower as we know it. Although some elite institutions of higher education will survive in some form, many other institutions will continue to decline, close, and/or merge—swept up in a social and technological tsunami.

In response to these (and other) challenges, the Ivory Tower will transform into a decentered learning environment superseding its physical location. Decentered education emphasizes learning in a virtual environment where students can progress at their own pace supported by AI tools that facilitate an individual's acquisition of knowledge and skills. Decentered education will dislodge the traditional college campus as the catalyst for knowledge, innovation, and connection. I will advance two primary thoughts concerning the future of the academy as decentered education. First, I will discuss how decentered education displaces the traditional campus—the academic homeplace—and explore its implications for faculty and students. Second, I will explain how we as higher education instructors can create a new academic homeplace in our technological world.

Decentered education and the displacement of the academic homeplace

For centuries, the Ivory Tower was an insulated structure reserved for the elite and those with the means to enter or maintain status in the professional class. The university was the center for learning, research, and innovation. Its traditions, practices, and power relationships occurred in a physical location where individuals engaged in the pursuit of knowledge to undergo a transformative learning experience (Staley, 2019). Likewise, for those who chose to pursue a career in academics, their transformation involved being enculturated to the traditions and processes of the Ivory Tower.

In the academic “home,” faculty learned how to navigate, internalize, and perpetuate the ways of higher education. The quest for faculty to reach tenure is as much about reaching distinction in teaching/scholarship/service as it is about understanding, maintaining, and perpetuating the academy's unique culture. Thus, achieving faculty status and a place at the table in the Ivory Tower can be understood as the academic homeplace.

Academic homeplace

bell hooks (1990) articulated the need for community through the concept of the “homeplace.” The homeplace is a psychological place of security that affirms the humanity shared among individuals of a cultural group. Homeplaces operate as sites of resistance to oppression by constructing welcoming spaces where individuals are seen, heard, understood, and valued.

As hooks (1990) stated, in the homeplace:

All black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world. (p. 42)

Many groups—especially marginalized groups—create homeplaces to confirm their worth, values, and ways of being.

As a Ph.D. student, my enculturation into the Ivory Tower involved establishing my homeplace among faculty and students where we reaffirmed our humanness, valued our ways of being, and supported one another through our doctoral studies at Ohio University. The homeplace we created would later become a bond we relied upon to support one another professionally as we moved through tenure and promotion on our own campuses. In 30 years of being a faculty member and academic leader, the most important leadership lesson I have learned is the significance of creating a “homeplace” comprising authentic relationships where faculty, staff, and students can thrive (Brown, 2021). Success can be achieved without a homeplace, but a homeplace makes academic life more meaningful.

Displacing the academic homeplace

I was first introduced to Kenneth Gergen’s (1991/2000) *The Saturated Self* as a doctoral student at Ohio University. Returning to the work years later, Gergen’s concept of “the technologies of saturation” uncannily captures our current times. According to Gergen (1991/2000), when technology saturates every area of life, it undermines traditions, reason, and objectivity. AI is one such technology dramatically changing society and the Ivory Tower.

While angst surrounding AI and academics abounds—anyone paying attention to the trends in higher education was aware of the warning signs for change prior to AI’s insertion into higher education. Previously mentioned external factors including the public’s skepticism toward the value of higher education, declining state and federal funding, the enrollment cliff, student debt, and student mental health are a few of these warning signs (Kaminer et al., 2025).

Furthermore, if we are honest in our self-assessment of the Ivory Tower, some actions by a handful of colleagues have contributed to the public’s skepticism. For better or for worse, faculty are the front lines when it comes to educating students. From my experience, when a few faculty are not excelling in their duties (i.e., not answering emails, not grading student work in a timely manner, not using the course management system, etc.), it confirms some of the public’s doubts about higher education. We can no longer ignore the previously mentioned external factors and internal challenges that are being compounded by AI in our technological world.

The shifting values toward higher education demand a reconceptualization of the Ivory Tower. As Staley (2019) argued, “The problem is not that universities are lacking in innovation, but rather they suffer from a poverty of imagination of what that innovation might be” (p. 12). Thus, institutions that survive will be ones that are not beholden to the Ivory Tower of the past but can reimagine the entire landscape of higher education. Technology is one impetus for change as well as the means to address change. As Gergen (1991/2000) stated, “In the emerging world of saturation, an entire new form of reasoning will be required. It is not ‘the answer’ that we must seek but rather a continuous ‘process of answering’” (p. xxiii).

For higher education, the continuous process of answering will involve the recurrent use of technology. Institutions who embrace technology will be better positioned to

survive the paradigm shift. From my vantage point, the new academic homeplace will be driven by the following trends.²

Higher education will shift to virtual learning

Decentered education will reconfigure the traditional Ivory Tower. How we learn, what we learn, and where we learn will take place primarily in a virtual space. Technology has made just about everything in our lives “on demand” as we access goods and services from the comforts of our home. The Ivory Tower is not immune from the “technologies of social saturation” and its remaking of society. Institutions will continue to utilize virtual learning as it makes education more accessible for individuals beyond the traditional student. While the pandemic forced higher education into a virtual space, our shifting values post pandemic will continue to drive decentered education’s acceleration. Moreover, online course construction and the virtual learning experience will continue to improve, making it an attractive option for both traditional and nontraditional students.

Graduate education will be the first to fully embrace decentered education. While many institutions currently offer both in-person and virtual options, our shifting values will make the decision to eliminate in-person classes for virtual learning at the graduate level an easy one. The experience that millions of graduate students have had of moving to another part of the country like I did many years ago will be a bygone experience like so many other cultural relics in our technological world.

Meanwhile, for institutions that will still maintain a physical campus, the majority of undergraduate programs will be offered via a multitude of delivery methods—including 100% online. Why? Because college students of the future will want to engage in the remnants of the college experience such as participating in sports, the performance arts, clubs, service learning, etc. They will not necessarily, however, want to sit in a traditional classroom 3 hours a week. Additionally, decentered education will encourage the expansion of experiential learning, internships, and co-ops, thus making a degree more valuable. In the transformed Ivory Tower, we might recognize the heart of learning, but its form will be novel. For example, instead of sitting in a course, expanding co-ops would enable students to work at a company to gain industry experience and to build professional networks, which can lead to employment after graduation. Drexel University is one example that has a robust co-op program, as 94% of its undergraduates participate in co-ops, and 97% of business students are employed (or in graduate school) within a year after graduation (Colegrove & Nguyen, 2025).

Higher education will become more individualized, highly flexible, and adaptable

Decentered education uses virtual learning spaces to create programs where students learn at their own pace with support from AI tools that assist them in building knowledge and skills.

Instead of the time and effort it takes for departments to create course schedules (often based upon the convenience of faculty and not students), decentered education eliminates this problem. With decentered education, any required course will be offered on a regular and consistent basis asynchronously, online, and courses can be added as needed, giving students more flexibility and reliability in completing their program.

Whether a student is on a physical campus or is remote—all students will have the option to take asynchronous, online courses in durations varying from 3 to 15 weeks.

Moreover, AI supported coursework will be more responsive to student questions, will provide instant feedback on assignments, and will yield more timely grading of assignments—even communicating its feedback in a pleasant tone!

AI support will be embedded throughout the university in areas such as financial aid, advising, career development, etc., making the university accessible 24/7 for students. As Alexander (2020) argued, “We can see tutorware emerging through a continuation of the current wave of AI developments” (p. 194). Our technological world’s creation of “on demand” content where programs can be accessed and consumed in various ways will influence how education is delivered in the transformed Ivory Tower. The impact of AI and automation on jobs in higher education is unclear. However, programs/units/individuals who can leverage AI to perform their work better and faster will be at an advantage in our technological world.

Programs will reorient from discipline knowledge to the acquisition of specific knowledge and skills

Since the early inception of academe—when classical subjects dominated teaching and learning—a proliferation of academic programs has emerged. In comparatively recent times, a discipline’s legitimacy was reflected by its place in the academy as a department offering a degree program.³ The effort to create and maintain distinct discipline knowledge, however, is no longer reflective of our rapidly changing technological world. The traditional major and slow-moving process of creating, revising, and assessing curriculum is archaic and inefficient. More significantly, disciplines have grown in and of themselves—sometimes at the expense of adequately preparing students for the world in which they will work, engage, and live.

The result is a growth of what Laff and Carlson (2025) defined as the “empty college degree”—students graduate with a transcript that indicates a major along with a list of courses whose relationship to one another is unclear. As Laff and Carlson (2025) explained,

With so many possibilities, they (students) struggle to make decisions about courses and activities that will resonate with their hidden intellectualism, their vocational purpose, and their life goals. Too many students face these choices on their own, and they make easy calls, picking courses that fit their schedules, that have popular professors, or that will not tax them academically. (p. 27)

Moreover, students with “empty college degrees” are unable to articulate their specific skills or the value they bring to the workforce. The consequences of the “empty college degree” are dramatic—often leading to underemployment, debt, and limited opportunities (Laff & Carlson, 2025).

For the Ivory Tower to remain a viable option, it must look outward instead of inward to reform the curriculum to emphasize the attainment of specific knowledge and skills. Curriculum would better serve students by scaffolding learning among related courses by *skills*—rather than by discipline and utilize more experiential learning such as internships and co-ops. The scaffolded learning should culminate in standalone certificates that can be stacked upon to build, complement, and develop specific knowledge and skills.

An example of reimagining the student learning experience is at Polymath University where students are required to major in three dissimilar majors to cultivate

interdisciplinary thinking, creative problem-solving, and the generation of innovative strategies (Staley, 2019). When students engage in learning from distinct programs, it cultivates critical thinking, problem-solving, and innovation as they draw from different perspectives. Students achieve integrated thinking to solve problems as opposed to selecting courses from a menu of options to fulfill requirements (Staley, 2019).

Programs will offer degrees with a greater alignment between learning outcomes and specific industry needs

In our rapidly changing technological world, there is a widening employment gap between what employers expect and the education graduates receive (Cengage Group, 2025). However, aligning higher education curricula with preprofessional experiences through robust industry partnerships will strengthen students' employment opportunities after graduation. The revision of program curriculum can highlight students' transferable skills, which affirms National Communication Associations (NCAs) Learning Outcomes in Communication Project that implored the discipline to define what a communication student should know, understand, and be able to do (Brown et al., 2016).

An example of the Ivory Tower working with industry is the Fairfield County Workforce Center (FCWC), a partnership between Fairfield County Commissioners, Ohio University, and Hocking College. Through the FCWC, standalone certificates have been created that correspond with specific in-demand jobs in automation, mechatronics, and semiconductor manufacturing (Weber, 2025). The standalone certificates, which are financial aid eligible, can be completed in one year and can be "stacked" into more advanced degrees such as the Associate in Applied Science in Engineering Technology Degree for those who would like to continue their education. This example demonstrates the kind of university–industry collaboration that must intensify for the Ivory Tower to remain relevant. Partnerships like these increase the value of higher education and counter the problem of the "empty college degree."

These trends will continue to transform the Ivory Tower via decentered education that is more accessible, more cost-effective, and more individualized while graduating students with specific knowledge and skills required for the workforce. For example, Eastern University is implementing decentered education and is experiencing record growth in its *LifeFlex* programs, which are 100% online, self-paced, and cost-effective. Eastern's MBA has the largest graduate enrollment in the Philadelphia area surpassing the Wharton School and the MBA at Villanova University (Romero, 2025). The value proposition of decentered education is the future of the Ivory Tower. Institutions that do not adapt, do not integrate AI and automation, do not reimagine their enterprise, and do not have a continuous "process of answering" will be in peril.

Transformation of faculty roles and the student experience

My career has witnessed the ongoing transformation of the Ivory Tower. How much times had changed became more apparent to me when I returned to Ohio University's Athens campus after more than 20 years to serve on the School of Communication Studies' Alumni Advisory Council. As I walked on Court Street and the College Green, I knew my location, but I did not recognize much of the landscape surrounding

me. Even the communication program, where I used to call home in Lasher Hall, had moved down the street into a state-of-the-art building, Schoonover Hall. My return to the Ohio University campus was a metaphor for the ongoing transformation of the Ivory Tower. In the new academic homeplace, we might recognize some facets of our past educational experience, but many features will be unrecognizable to those who have toiled in it. This transformation will have implications for both faculty and students.

Redefining the role of faculty

The faculty role has evolved since I left Ohio University for my first tenure-track faculty position at SUNY Buffalo State College⁴ in 1997. Decentered education will profoundly affect pedagogy and radically reshape faculty duties and responsibilities, with the most compelling changes occurring in what and how faculty teach. Decentered education will redefine faculty from discipline knowledge experts who impart information to curators of information who teach via scaffolded assignments to achieve specific learning outcomes. In short, learning will be measured by evaluating the process instead of the product (Bowen & Watson, 2024).

Since learning will occur virtually, faculty will work in a hybrid capacity—creating asynchronous, AI-supported learning modules. Students will complete courses online with faculty available for one-on-one virtual meetings as necessary. Faculty who possess the skill-set to create AI tools such as chatbots and tutors to support student learning will be the norm. Each university teaching and learning center will provide professional development for faculty to create and use these AI tools effectively. The use of AI in pedagogy will lead to new and innovative ways for students to acquire specific knowledge and skills.

Decentered education will mean that all faculty will need to excel at using technology. No more opt-outs or holdouts from using technology to teach. Even faculty in the creative arts will need to be skillful in incorporating AI into their teaching and guiding students how to collaborate with AI ethically and effectively.⁵ AI tools like *Sora 2*, which generate videos with audio, sound effects, and music from text prompts, mean that the performing arts must adapt to our technological world. Regardless of major, technology will be the driver in how information is learned, applied, and created. In addition, since curriculum will align with industry, professors of practices who can facilitate preprofessional experiences, internships, and co-ops for students will become the norm.

Embracing this future means the de-emphasis of faculty with terminal degrees and greater salience on faculty with industry experience and connections that lead to employment for students. Esoteric disciplinary knowledge will give way to AI-driven instruction focused on teaching specific knowledge and skills that prepare students for the workforce.

With any change, there are pluses, minuses, and unexpected outcomes. One unexpected circumstance for faculty is that institutions will no longer be limited by location in hiring, as most teaching in our AI-driven world can be conducted remotely without faculty physically present on campus. Decentered education will create a highly competitive “open market” for the most accomplished faculty. On the other hand, faculty will not have to move when taking a new faculty position. Thus, the remote nature of faculty jobs will add a new perk to academic life.

Redefining the student experience

While rapid technological changes are impacting the Ivory Tower's traditions, for this generation of students "technology saturation" is their way of life. Decentered education simply brings their way of interacting with the world into the Ivory Tower. The student experience in the transformed Ivory Tower will give students more individual choice and more personalized assistance while redefining community.

Decentered education will give students greater control over what they learn, how they learn, the time they take to learn, and the cost of their education. Similar to how we now view our favorite media content "on demand," higher education will offer more cost-effective, more flexible, and more self-paced programs. Also, more standalone certificates that promote specific knowledge and skills that are aligned with workforce needs will be available for students. With information changing so rapidly, a new type of student may emerge—one who pursues standalone certificates throughout their lifetime to avoid the "empty college degree" and to stay employable in our technological world.

The adaptability of decentered education will also mean students will receive more personalized assistance. AI tools will be employed for advising, tutoring, and assisting learning. Video lectures and content can be instantaneously translated and captioned by AI, making learning more inclusive and accessible to support diverse learning styles. In addition, student work can be assessed by AI tools to provide prompt feedback. AI tools can cater to student needs by analyzing student work, identifying strengths and weaknesses, and offering strategies for improvement.

The individualized nature of decentered education, however, means community is no longer fostered in a physical location but in a virtual one. Decentered education expands students' networking abilities and the groups they may want to join and participate in. Community is no longer limited to one's geographic location. Community can be developed with other individuals around the world. Engagement, problem-solving, and critical thinking will be fostered and can lead to innovation in extracurricular activities.

Decentered education and the higher education instructor

The values associated with our technological world will not only disrupt how education is delivered but also alter the college experience. Much like my return to Ohio University after 20 years, the new academic homeplace will have remnants of the past because we still have the need to be connected, seen, heard, and valued. Faculty members must cultivate skills to shape the new academic homeplace through community building, mentoring, and embracing human-centered AI.

Community building

How do you create home in spaces that transcend time and place? Whether a student attends one of the surviving campuses or studies entirely online, virtual spaces where students and professors can cultivate community will need to exist. New academic homeplaces will utilize virtual and digital communication to build relationships and create meaning and memory—to reaffirm "dialogical education."

Dialogical education emphasizes intentional one-on-one conversations between a faculty member and student to cultivate ethical relationships (Arnett, 1992). Building community in a classroom takes effort, but the need for connection is important in this technological world. As faculty member Carlo Rottella (2025) argued,

I try to make the classroom a place where they (students) feel not just free to speak but expected to speak, responsible for doing their part as a citizen. ... People usually have something to say, and they're more likely to say it when they feel they're part of a community. (para. 23)

Being seen and heard can—and must—happen in the new academic homeplace, but it requires intentional effort to nurture and remind us of our shared humanity.

Faculty members must be equipped to build community in the new academic homeplace. In the one-on-one virtual spaces, educators can enact communication skills to ensure that students are seen, heard, understood, and valued—to fulfill the principles of dialogical education that are vital in affirming what hooks (1990) described as “the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture our spirits” (p. 41). Yes, even students who will be on campus will mostly be learning online. Thus, the intentional one-on-one virtual space is where community will be created to remind us of our human characteristics—to spurn hope, humor, and happiness.

Mentoring

On West State Street in Athens, Ohio is Miller’s Chicken—a plain brick building with “Miller’s Chicken” painted in giant red capital letters against a white background that spans the length of the top of the building’s façade. When I was a doctoral student, Miller’s Chicken became the meeting place to discuss drafts of my dissertation with my Ph.D. advisor, Dr. jw smith. In time, Miller’s represented more than just a working lunch: it was a place that cultivated professional collaboration, encouragement, and guidance which has lasted a lifetime.

Likewise, the new academic homeplace must create spaces where faculty members can build relationships with students and colleagues. These spaces will provide guidance and support for individuals to navigate the realities of our technological world. Mentoring is needed now more than ever, and it must be enacted, nurtured, and protected. With the lack of funding for conference travel and professional participation, mentoring whether in person or virtual will need to persist. Mentoring can be maintained through consistent positive communication, and faculty members are well positioned to fulfill this responsibility.

Human-centered AI

The movement to embrace decentered education is not an endorsement of its superiority to the current landscape of the Ivory Tower. Rather, it is a pragmatic perspective that articulates how the technological world’s values will change higher education. In this shift, while we value technology’s mantra of “better, faster, and more convenient,” we must assert that technology supports our human endeavors—*not* vice versa. In our new academic homeplace, we must advocate for the ethical and responsible use of AI

systems and how they are to support us in our quest for knowledge and the acquisition of skills.

Rottella (2025) offers many suggestions for keeping the human in the learning process—coming alongside students to discuss their decision-making as they work through stages of an assignment as opposed to creating assignments where students submit a finished product. We must demand engagement as human thinkers in our technological world. As faculty members who value the exchange of ideas, we must embrace this value in our new academic homeplace.

Conclusion

Looking back at the moment over 30 years ago when I arrived at Ohio University as a doctoral student, I could not have imagined the journey I would embark on. In my journey, I have learned the mysterious and often foreign ways of the professorship as a Ph.D. student, navigating its rigors and power dynamics to ultimately achieve tenure as a faculty member. In the process, I have embraced the challenge of academic leadership while creating homeplaces where individuals can flourish. I was given the opportunity to enter the Ivory Tower, and now I have reached a level of accomplishment to shape it. I could never have envisioned the journey I have traveled or the path that still lies ahead. The Ivory Tower has undergone—and continues to undergo—changes in pedagogy, policies, duties, and culture. Amidst all these changes, the Scripps College of Communication at Ohio University has supported and nurtured me through it.

Ohio University taught me how to be an effective teacher-scholar by emphasizing the importance of building authentic relationships with faculty and fellow classmates that have endured my entire career. The Bobcat network included me in research projects and conference presentations, acclimating me to our professional conferences held by NCA and the Eastern Communication Association (ECA), invited me back to serve on the School of Communication Studies' Alumni Advisory Council, and provided me with unwavering support as an academic leader. As higher education changes, it is exactly these types of outreach, inclusion, and meaningful collaborations that will be necessary as new academic homeplaces emerge.

My generation of colleagues who were trained and who matured in the traditional academic homeplace might not be able to go home again, but we can take those enduring lessons and experiences to cultivate new academic homeplaces for future generations to thrive in our technological world.

Notes

1. I was the first person to complete a master's thesis in the Department of Communication Studies at West Chester University. As I worked on the thesis, I received personal correspondence from President Carter, who wrote in response to my work, "To Tim Brown, I have read your research paper with care and found it to be the best analysis of the 1980 Olympics issue that I have read" (as cited in, Brown, 2021, p. 57).
2. My forecasting is not a value statement on whether these changes will make higher education better or worse—rather, my ideas offer a pragmatic perspective of how the trends in higher education may continue to unfold.

3. As a doctoral student at Ohio University, I learned of the discipline of communication studies' history, growth, and legitimacy within the academy and the importance of influential scholars such as Herbert A. Wichelns (1925), whose essay, "The Literary Criticism of Oratory" was monumental in establishing a new discipline of Communication Studies distinct from English/Literature. Reaffirming a distinct discipline within the Ivory Tower might be best illustrated by the largest professional organization for communication faculty changing its name from the Speech Communication Association to the National Communication Association in 1997 to signal a discipline that represented more than just speech.
4. SUNY Buffalo State College is now SUNY Buffalo State University.
5. My explanation of how technology will shape all programs, even those we are accustomed to taking place in a physical location, does not mean technology is better than the traditional experience. Rather, we are living in a world that has embraced technology as the way of the future. The pandemic showed that all learning can take place virtually, and as virtual and augmented reality continues to develop experiences that define the liberal arts, natural sciences, etc., any form of learning/experience can and will be accomplished virtually, expanding these experiences to new and nontraditional audiences.

Disclosure statement

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