As a professor of communication and rhetoric, I have spent a great deal of time in the last few years writing essays on various topics and letters to the editor rather than merely publishing research articles. Many of my university colleagues and members of the community wonder why I do this.

For more than 40 years I have taught a college-level course in “Argumentation and Advocacy” — a course premised on the notion that a free exchange in the market place of ideas is a worthy and necessary pursuit. I frequently remind
students that writing letters and essays on the page opposite the editorial page, commonly called op-eds, is an essential part of civic life, especially at this challenging moment in America’s political history.

As citizens, our responsibility is to stand up and speak truth to power. What matters is not one’s particular political views but willingness to engage others. Without engagement there is no possibility for persuasion and change — and hence little chance that our democracy will survive.

As a scholar I feel a special duty to use my knowledge and expertise to educate the public, helping readers wrestle with controversial issues. Too often academics are accused of being sequestered in the ivory tower, producing insular research read by a handful of people. I have long held that this need not and should not be the case.

Admittedly, entering the public sphere is risky: Not only does my university, the University of Texas at Austin, refuse to consider such public writing in my merit-salary evaluation, but I often receive hate mail in response to op-eds and letters. Happily, recently I received this anonymous letter in the U.S. mail postmarked Seattle, Washington and signed “Another fellow citizen who occasionally struggles.” — “Your perceptive, well-written op-ed today contains more insight into basic human nature than is usually found in a few short paragraphs. Thanks for writing it.”

Letters like this remind me why I should continue to publically express my views. If all of us do this, our democracy will thrive. The key, however, is being respectful and avoiding name calling and ad hominem arguments.

One of the most important concepts I teach students in my “Argumentation” class is “self-risk.” This goes well beyond the obvious public risks one assumes when writing or speaking in public (i.e., the attributions others make of the arguer). Self-risk is the implicit acknowledgment we make when engaging in argument that we might be wrong — that our beliefs might be reshaped or changed as a result of argument. Self-risk involves the openness to persuasion and thus is the opposite of dogma.

As my students come to realize, self-risk is not an idealistic prescription preached by their professor. It is something all of us at various times choose to embrace
(whether we say it or not), especially when the subject of an argument is important to us.

In short, when one — including me — writes letters and op-eds, by definition we take on both public risk and self-risk. In the last few years I have concluded that the inherent public risks are more than outweighed by conviction for the views I express.

Self-risk has its own rewards. By writing op-eds and letters, my own beliefs and those of others have changed. A recent example of this is a claim I made approving of the New York Times anonymous op-ed author to avoid going public. As a result of responses to my argument, I now have been persuaded to believe that remaining anonymous is not in the best interest of our government and provides grist for those who attempt to discredit the media with claims of fake news.

My hope, therefore, is that more citizens and scholars will enter the public sphere. Our democracy depends on this, as does our ability to grow and mature as human beings.

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