As a professor of communication and rhetoric, I have spent more time in the last few years writing op-eds and letters to the editor than publishing research articles. Many of my colleagues wonder why I do this.

For over forty years I have taught a college-level course in argumentation and advocacy — a course premised on the necessity of the free exchange in the market place of ideas. I frequently remind students that opinion writing is an essential part of civic life, especially at this polarizing moment in American history.

I teach them what matters is not one’s particular political views but willingness to engage others. Without engagement there is no possibility for change — and little chance that our democracy will survive.
Too often academics are accused of being sequestered in the ivory tower, producing insular research read by a handful of people. Scholars have a special duty to use their knowledge and expertise to educate the public, helping them wrestle with controversial issues. Like other citizens, our responsibility is to stand up and speak truth to power.

Admittedly, entering the public sphere is risky: My University refuses to consider such public writing in my merit salary evaluation, and I often receive hate mail from the public in response to op-eds and letters.

And another risk, which goes well beyond the obvious public risks one assumes when writing or speaking in public, is “self-risk”—one of the most important concepts I teach students in argumentation and advocacy.

Self-risk is the understanding that our beliefs might be reshaped or changed as a result of argument. It involves acknowledgment of an openness to persuasion, which is the opposite of dogma.

Self-risk 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.

But the risks of entering the public sphere has its rewards: Last week, I received a letter thanking me for my perspective and insight. The letter-writer — who described themselves as a “fellow citizen” — related on the grounds of our shared citizenship, our shared concerns.

By writing op-eds and letters, my own beliefs and those of others have changed. A recent example of this is an article I wrote approving the decision of a New York Times op-ed author, a senior official in the Trump administration, to remain anonymous. The responses to the article-persuaded me to change my mind. I now believe that remaining anonymous is not in the best interest of our government and empowers President Trump’s dangerous behavior.

My hope 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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