Symposium on Early Career International Law Academia: Balancing my Time or Why Watching Ru Paul's Drag Race is a Better Use of your Time

By:

Aoife O'Donoghue

April 15, 2022

First, it is important to say I enjoy being an academic. I do. As people who know me well know, I love a top fact. Academia is definitely the place to find an abundance of them. I also enjoy teaching. As a student I used to teach swimming to pay for life, and it always made me happy when someone got a thing and I helped them along the way to getting it. I like my colleagues, the stu-dents, and all the many friends. But I also like other things and I think they make me a better aca-demic and, more importantly, a better person.

A second element is that I do not follow the school that sees academia as all important. (Legal) academia is not so important that anything really needs to

be done immediately, ever. With the important caveat of students or colleagues in crises, it is very ever rarely the case that my views on *jus cogens* are so important that the world needs to have them right now.

I also do not believe that you can 'love' your job so much that you 'enjoy' doing it all the time. As I say, part of my attraction to academia is a love of top facts, but I can also learn some top facts by watching a Netflix documentary about Pop or talking to a six-year-old about spiders. I do not take myself seriously. I do my job seriously, but I see a distinction between doing my job with the attention and seriousness needed and seeing myself as so full of import that I 'need' to answer that email at 1am.

It is also important to say that my experience is not everyone else's: everyone's pressures are different, everyone's way of working to be at their best is different. Nonetheless, there is a line between "I work best late in the evenings", which is fine, and "I work best late in the evenings having worked for the last seven days all day from 7am". But how I work (and have worked) is not necessarily how we should all work.

In remembering how I started with my own strict delineations, I have to credit my parents. My mother in particular was always very insistent on coming home, changing your uniform and do-ing your homework and then doing whatever you wanted. I watched a lot of television as a child, but I also always did my homework and had it done at a reasonable hour. (This worked for my personality, not all my siblings followed this model). From a very early age, I had a view of get-ting 'work' done and dusted and then fully embracing my leisure time. This continued in universi-ty, where I was never an 'all-nighter getting the essay done/up all night before the exam' individ-ual. I was a somewhat diligent undergrad. I did study a bit, but I could have done way more. But I slept, and socialised and had a job and, well, I'm still here.

My route into academia and postgraduate studies was somewhat different to most and reflects an era of UK and Irish academia, which no longer exists, and that needs to be borne in mind. I got my first full-time academic job a few months after finishing my masters. I did not start my PhD for another three years. Indeed, I started when I started my new job, initially on a fixed-term con-tract, in Durham. So, I was working full time, having to publish to get a

permanent position and doing my PhD. Having worked in academia already helped. I knew the flow of the job – when was extremely busy, when was quiet, how long administration took, how long meetings took, how long all the small jobs that as students you do not see fills academics' time.

Early on, I had established a pattern where I did not work weekends or evenings (except for marking season). This did change – with the PhD I worked a day of the weekend, but no more than that. I always, always took a day off, I took holidays, and I exercised most days. While writ-ing up, I watched Battlestar Galactica and that was a bad decision. Do not watch a show about being relentlessly chased while writing up. I 100% stand behind that piece of advice.

The next thing is, of course, well how did you do that. And what worked for me here was that I treated both the PhD and being an academic as a job. And I still do. It is a job I get paid for; it is a job where I am in a union and go on strike, it is a job where I am held to account. It is a job and so I do it approximate – and it is approximate – to what I am paid to do. When I say paid – there are lots that we do that is 'unpaid' but if our employers expect us to do (peer reviews, blogs etc.), well it then it is part of that job. Working at Durham helped. It has a very strong research ethic and gives the time for that which not everywhere does and that is very important to the individ-ual experience.

Academia is paid work and seeing it like that helps. It helps, especially in the transition from PhD to academic life. It is a piece of advice I like to dole out – when you were a student you studied x way doing y hours, you are now doing a job, work regular hours. This can be 11-7 or 7-5 or what-ever works for you and your life and your caring responsibilities and your hobbies and your cross-continental collaborations. Since becoming a parent, this became starker – the child will not feed themselves – but equally it is true that videogame does not play itself either- and both are important. That transition is crucial. You have to change student patterns to work patterns, and that can take time.

Now there are all the other things: get off Twitter, stop reading online newspapers etc., but you know being an academic is also being informed. So yes, I should spend less of my time online. We all should. We all know that. If I have a deadline I do look less, but I also write a paragraph, read a blog post,

write a sentence, delete it and oh well might as well do that PowerPoint I have to do now. That is how I work. You can get apps to stop you looking. That depends on how you work, but if it might help, consider it. Most of you know when you are dallying on Twitter to hide from work, sometimes you even say so on Twitter. If I find myself doing that as I am avoiding something, I look at my to-do list and pick something else. (I have a to-do list, its handwritten, I cross things off and rewrite it every week, some things have spent years on it. I put big things – finish book and small things – book train – on it, that way I am always crossing something off. Lists can panic people, but it works for me).

Also, please do not give in to the performance of busyness. We are all busy, all of us. So – with the caveat of the stressed-out mate who actually needs you to help them – when someone goes on about how they were up all-night doing x, y or z, or responds to a request by telling you they are just so busy implying you clearly are less busy, remember that this is not the norm, nor does it need to be held up as the norm nor somehow valorised. It is particularly odious from people who let others take care of their lives for them. Great, you spend every evening writing but who exactly walks the dog, does the shopping, plans the holidays, collects the children from childcare or plans dinners out with friends. That model of working is based on a very particular white male academic who passes over caring responsibilities to others and gets all the privileges that come with being a white male middle-class academic. It is not the norm. Performing it as the norm puts pressure on everyone else to be the same because it suggests if you do not, you are not serious.

I think perhaps another way in which I manage is that I am happy to not know everything about everything. I'm happy to say 'oh, I do not know x'. I'm happy to put x's articles on my reading list and read her work later and I do not feel any shame at admitting a gap in my knowledge. (And when someone says they have not read x in the original Klingon, do not gasp as if their views are now invalid - that is also a performance, and it is unnecessary and mean). I cannot and do not know all things and x can wait a few weeks so that I can go on my holidays in West Cork and do nothing. That reading pile will never, ever, ever end. The sooner you are at one with that and happy to admit it the better. Nothing ever needs to be read now.

Now I know there are people out there who think I am not serious enough. I am extremely serious about my students and about my research I just do not feel

the need to perform it or to ‘lean-in’ to a toxic norm. I possess privileges that help me do that, that is certain. But I like to ex-change top facts in non-sensical conversations that have nothing to do with law, I like going out for runs, I like watching Ru Paul’s Drag Race and What We Do in the Shadows. Anyone who tells you that those things are not commensurate with being a serious academic working the hours that are needed to be a serious academic are wrong.

View online: Symposium on Early Career International Law Academia: Balancing my Time or Why Watching Ru Paul’s Drag Race is a Better Use of your Time

Provided by Afronomicslaw