Public Scholarship in Practice and Philosophy

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Introduction

Connecting to the public is a key part of the mission of higher education. The ultimate receptor of higher education is the global collective of humanity, whether through the education of civic members in the classroom, or building new knowledge through a research program. Public engagement with scholarship is not new, but because evolutions like knowledge sharing through technology, and the renewed need for critical discourse in the public sphere, there are new opportunities and new urgency for public scholarship.

This piece offers several threads that bind an ideal together: there are practical actions to increase the public-ness of scholarship, increasingly compelling reasons to adopt an outward-orientation, as well as many challenges to performing public scholarship in higher education. Coming from positions in academic librarianship, traditionally situated adjacent to the daily work of teaching, graduate student development, research progress, and contributions to a field, both authors actively engage in each of these activities regularly as Scholar Librarians in a new mold. As such, we carry a transdisciplinary perspective alongside professional principles of public access to all kinds of information. Our goal is to offer an overarching picture of public scholarship as a common mission, available to any who are interested in engaging with their neighbors,
communities, and unknown colleagues in an open discourse across the boundaries of Town and Gown.

Public Scholarship in Practice

A first challenge is that there is no single understanding of what public scholarship should be. Instead, it is an evolving practice drawing from public history, the open access movement, service learning, the digital humanities and more. Numerous approaches, values, and purposes are situated at any number of points in the research and publication cycle. However, a growing diversity of representative projects, several highlighted herein, gestures towards continuous active development of the means and modes of public scholarship. Here we offer five different ways to apply public scholarship, through products, process, pedagogy, in person, and informed by/in collaboration with communities.

Product

Often misunderstood, but nonetheless an important mode of public scholarship, is making research accessible to anyone online. There is an ethical argument that the taxpaying public should have the right to consume research is funded by tax dollars. Kathleen Fitzpatrick argues also that making more humanities research open to public can help fight public ignorance and apathy towards the humanities (Giving it Away). Other studies, while focused on scientific literature, suggest that publicly available research products significantly increase in visibility and reach, including especially citations (Lawrence; Gargouri et al.; Hajjem et al.). There are benefits
to both the academic discipline of humanities and to the scholar by making research publicly available.

Determining personal strategies for open humanities scholarship can be a daunting or uninteresting task, as the debates and opportunities are constantly evolving. A relatively easy, and low-risk way to provide public access to scholarly products is the sharing of pre-publication versions of scholarly works in an institutional repository (if available) or a disciplinary repository, such as the MLA’s Humanities Commons. If you choose to deposit a pre-print, thesis, or conference poster, understanding your rights to your own work is essential, and a check with your local subject specialist, scholarly communications, or digital scholarship librarian can resolve any questions you have regarding the process.

Disciplinary publishing conventions often dissuade emerging scholars from exploring open publishing options. However, support for the open scholarship in the humanities is actively growing on the part of senior scholars, publishers, and institutions alike; there are likely more opportunities than you think to make some facet of your research public. As an example of conventions in evolution, in 2018 Robin Truth Goodman, professor of literature at Florida State University, published *Promissory Notes: On the Literary Conditions of Debt* with Lever Press. Aside from being the first monograph ever published on Lever’s digital platform called Fulcrum, the press itself is a digital-native publisher designed to support sustainable open access monographs, governed by a consortium of liberal arts institutions. It is encouraging to observe
the shifting tide toward public scholarship when tenured professors, well-established in their field, choose open/public/digital platforms for the dissemination of their work.

Peter Suber, director of the Harvard University Office for Scholarly Communication, noted some common “open access” (OA) myths, like all open access requiring extensive publishing costs from the author, or that openly published research is of lesser quality (*Open Access, Six Myths*). In actuality, there are many high-quality publishers with open access imprints, offering opportunities to participate in OA without any author fees. University presses and publishers like UNC Press, University of Michigan, University of California’s Luminos, and Open Library of the Humanities, are just a few of the publishers currently pioneering open access publishing focused on humanities scholarship. Even presses that are not currently engaged in open access publishing may be interested in experimenting with it given the broad industry interest in digital publishing. Conducting an investigation of the quality and background of any publisher is a responsibility of each author, but there are an increasing variety of options for pursuing open, public, reputable publishing venues.

**Process**

For the more daring scholars, a still evolving trend is sharing in-progress manuscripts for forms of public review. Humanities scholars such as Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Cathy Davidson, David Theo Goldberg, and Mckenzie Wark have experimented with this method, using freely-available publishing and commenting tools to invite pre-publication peer review online (Fitzpatrick; Davidson and Goldberg; Wark). The MLA also piloted this method with the manuscript of its
edited volume *Digital Pedagogy in the Humanities* (Davis et al.). At the time of writing this chapter, MIT Press is currently hosting a pre-publication public review of *Data Feminism* by Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren Klein (2018, draft). Though some insist on the public’s disinterest in scholarly process, anecdotal evidence suggests differently. Historian Karin Wulf writes about a book club she started with a local retiree continued learning organization, “The goal [of the book club] is...the exposure to the scholarly process... we are reading it in part to see how research becomes scholarship. One of the things that was striking in the Wren classes was how much interest there is in the scholarly process. We spent quite a bit of time, for example, on peer review. Seriously” (*Engaging the Public*).

Though public facing review projects are still somewhat marginal, there is a growing interest in developing better social, technical, and evaluative protocols for supporting this type of work, such as represented by academic organizations like FORCE11 and the Collaborative Knowledge Foundation. Practically, scholars can easily set up their own virtual space for public review, using the WordPress theme CommentPress, a web-based annotation tool like hypothes.is, or even Google Docs. MLA Humanities Commons offers a free solution for those who don’t have web hosting services at their home institution. Graduate students may also find using these strategies useful in their own writing projects for improving their research while developing academic and professional connections and confronting the sometimes isolating conditions of dissertation work, such as found by one of this chapter’s co-authors in her #SocialDiss project (Glass).
Granted, many scholars may worry that opening up in-progress research to public review may leave their work vulnerable to plagiarism, public trolling, misunderstandings, over-hasty criticism, or endless labor in responding to comments. And indeed, even advocates of the practice have confirmed that some of these fears can come true at times. However, for those interested in developing dialogue around their research process, the unique opportunities of public facing review make it worthwhile to consider. Be advised, that simply posting drafts of a paper online will likely not develop an audience automatically. Develop engagement strategies that draw the public in, such as asking a few close colleagues to seed comments, writing about and linking to the public review session on a personal blog (or blogs like HASTAC), or promoting the review session in your social and professional networks. Be sure to articulate what types of feedback you’re interested in as well as guidelines for participation (especially for sensitive topics). These acts of scholarly vulnerability provide valuable sites for community interaction, broaden our concept of “peer review”, and display the sometimes bumpy process of developing scholarly work.

Pedagogy

Matthew Wickman, in a survey of directors at humanities centers and institutes seeking to outline the practices of public humanities, discovered that “teaching is widely seen to benefit the institution and the public, whereas research benefits the institution only” (What are the Public Humanities?). Since humanistic discourse is often born from or through the classroom, one example of public scholarship is adopting an open pedagogy. There is a vast body of literature on
the involvement of technology in the classroom, which can achieve some open pedagogical goals, but we’d like to introduce a different direction.

The Open Educational Resource (OER) movement is increasingly investing in the creation of shareable, adaptable, and accessible (in many senses of the word) teaching and learning materials. Joseph Locke and Ben Wright, editors of The American Yawp, a massively collaborative open American history textbook, argue that “every generation must write its own history...This textbook therefore offers... a coherent and accessible narrative from all the best of recent historical scholarship” (About). In constructing The American Yawp from volunteer efforts of over 300 historians, the editors also offer a glimpse into the classrooms engaging current events in light of historical lessons learned. The American Yawp is a case study for turning the scholarship of learning materials inside out as a publicly consumable textbook that lives online and can be adapted to any learning environment.

A core value for open pedagogy is the involvement of learners in the learning environment. Rajiv Jhangiani and Robin DeRosa write, “Open Pedagogy invites us to focus on how we can increase access to higher education and how we can increase access to knowledge– both its reception and its creation. This is, fundamentally, about the dream of a public learning commons, where learners are empowered to shape the world as they encounter it” (Open Pedagogy and Social Justice). The collaboration between Dr. Nora Haenn and the Libraries at North Carolina State University “to develop a new course that replaced writing a traditional term paper with making significant contributions to Wikipedia” (Don’t Throw Away That Assignment!) is an example of
open pedagogy. The exercise of writing in a classroom for such a public venue as the encyclopedia of everything, “spurred them like no other writing assignment I have given in the past” (Haenn).

Many research libraries, ever the agent for broader access, are building OER support programs, offering grant and project support to create new OER or using Interlibrary Loan and Course Reserves for more affordable learning materials. Additionally, libraries can provide basic understanding of copyright and fair use, which are essential components of OER and open pedagogy. The edited volume *Guide to Making Open Textbooks with Students*, the OER Commons, or SPARC’s “Connect OER” website are all great resources to gain starter knowledge. OER practitioners are also encouraged to familiarize themselves with cautionary advice about “openwashing,” or the disingenuous use of “open” for certain closed products (Thorn) and inadvertently “signing students up for surveillance” in the use of certain tools for OER practices (Meinke).

**Person**

The public intellectual is a recognizable trope, inside and outside higher education. We propose that any academic could fill that role in some capacity. Developing an online presence is common advice on this point, and is dealt with expertly in another chapter in this volume. Another opportunity, distilled by Sarah Bond, a historian who writes a column for Forbes, is learning to code-switch in the language we use for public reception. While discipline-specific language is important for advancing disciplinary discourse, developing a communication style
that translates ideas into the public sphere is an equally important skill. Bond argues, “We are teachers that discuss intellectual ideas with our students everyday, which means we are already prepared to broaden the reaches of our classrooms and embrace the public as well. They may not always want to listen or to read our work, but we can make sure to present it in a way that is there for them if they wish to” (Vox Populi). Recognizing that you are likely practicing some degree of code-switching already is a great start for more intentional effort, translating ideas into language that is welcoming and accessible outside the academy.

“Getting involved” in public programs in media, museums, and other forums” (National Task Force on Scholarship and the Public Humanities) are small steps toward recognition as a public intellectual. Becoming visible to the local community through op-eds in news websites, serving on boards of education for school districts, or developing an “academic-in-residence” program at the public library are other possibilities. One can also leverage personal blogs or social media as a space to develop public audiences, such as historian Kevin M. Kruse’s use of Twitter to provide historical context on breaking news and debunk incorrect historical claims to his two hundred and twenty four thousand followers (kevinmkruse.com). The organization of expert scholarly annotation on popular issues, such as Berkeley’s Climate Feedback Project, is another example, masquerading almost like a public service. The Brooklyn Public Philosopher’s talk series, the Public Philosophy Journal (which provides peer review for publicly-submitted pieces, among other activities), and the Two Scientists Walk into a Bar happy hour series, are also innovative models for creating new strategies and spaces for developing meaningful dialogue with the public. The shared characteristics of all of these are intentionally moving off-campus
into “the town square,” and inviting conversation in a semi-structured environment. Even small engagements, especially when collaborative, can help renew a sense of purpose and community around one’s academic work, not to mention endearing the local community to the practicality of scholarship.

With/In Community

Collaborating directly with communities outside of academia in the development and/or production of a research project is a mode of public scholarship gaining more devotees. Beyond just collecting feedback online, community-fed/led public scholarship is when non-academics play an active and direct role in shaping the research project’s goals, content, or even production. For example, the field of public history aims to increase participation in knowledge making practices, often seeking to address social and political inequities (Brennan). These forms of public collaboration often entailed bringing more diverse voices into library archives (that were often overlooked in academic projects), and/or producing resources directly for public engagement, such as through museum or library exhibitions.

Today, scholars have more options than ever before to develop academic projects with and for different publics thanks to the the increasing number of free or low cost tools such as Omeka, Scalar, and Wordpress. The Gail Project: An Okinawan-American dialogue, the Vietnamese Oral History Project, and the September 11th Digital Archive are all good examples of public-facing projects that intentionally included community participation. There are also public scholarship projects that are developed with broader public consumption in mind. Torn Apart/Separados, a
digital mapping project illustrating the territory and infrastructure of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) during the humanitarian U.S./Mexico border crisis of 2018, received considerable public attention and was written up by *Wired Magazine* (Dreyfuss). The Cleveland History Walking Tour app and the in-progress Apartheid Heritages 3D digital archive project are other exciting examples of community-focused scholarly research programs. It should be noted, however, that due to the scale of this style of public scholarship they often involve numerous collaborators, partnerships with libraries and/or cultural organizations, some form of grant support, and lend themselves to student participation. Community-led/fed public scholarship should be carefully planned to account for technical needs, cultural sensitivities, financial support, and sustainability of the project.

**Considerations and Concerns**

Motivations for public engagement with scholarship exist on a spectrum from “it’s good for me” to “it’s good for you” to “it’s good for us.” The greater potential impact for one’s own work is a powerful incentive; name recognition can benefit the scholar as much as the scholarship. A moral argument for academic knowledge as a public good, increasing the health of socio-cultural institutions, provides the warm and fuzzy feeling that what we do in the ivory tower matters. However, before enacting a public scholarship agenda, it is good to be aware of the various challenges and complexities.

Achieving a balance between the responsibility one has to a department, colleagues, or a major professor, and the intention to engage a non-scholarly audience is no small order. Identifying a
public scholarship—possible aspect of your current research, or an entirely new line of inquiry, is a challenge in itself. Additionally, public scholarship can involve an immense amount of additional labor that is not currently valued by academic structures. As a recent study from the ScholComm Lab at Simon Fraser University discovered in a survey of tenure and promotion guidelines, “while there is a relatively high incidence of the terms “public” and “community” in the RPT [review, promotion, and tenure] documents—that could be interpreted as an indicator that faculty do need to consider the nature of the publicness of their work—there are neither explicit incentives, nor clear structures of support for assessing the contributions of scholarship to the various dimensions of publicness” (Alperin et al.). Though there are many professional organizations and projects working to change academic review practices in ways that better reward public scholarship (such as HuMetricsHSS, the San Francisco Declaration On Research Assessment), scholars should ask their departments (and their scholarly communication or digital scholarship librarian) for clear guidelines on how this type of work can be evaluated.

Even properly rewarded public scholarship can have its complexities. Developing productive modes of getting public attention and engagement is a learning process. Like (good) peer review, public scholarship should be a conversation, inviting two-way communication. There is little point to communicating work with a public audience if one is unwilling to explain how Plato’s cave can help my sister-in-law get a job. Additionally, we in the academy need to be willing to admit that our work is not always, and may not always need to be, directly applicable to daily lives of our neighbors. Hearing and received that criticism is humbling, but may open avenues for future connections with those who gain new respect for a publicly-engaged intellectual.
Enriching the information ecosystem with publically-accessible research products is great and necessary. However, editing the Wikipedia page about contemporary Turkish hip-hop in Germany may have a greater impact on a high school student in Michigan’s empathy and interest in global music cultures. Public intellectuals always need to find venues for translating their intellectual work into common parlance; that skill and commitment will extend and contextualize the availability of open monographs, for example. The thin line between access to public scholarship and public engagement with scholarship is useful to keep in mind, and is expounded in another chapter in this volume.

Many issues surrounding the use of digital technology are also of relevance in public scholarship practices. Online harassment, doxing, bullying, and even death threats towards academics are on the rise, and scholars should carefully consider when and how to engage in public scholarship around politically or culturally sensitive issues (Cuevas). Scholars may also want to scrutinize the tools they use to produce and engage in public scholarship: many proprietary digital technologies operate according to what has been called “surveillance capitalism,” a profit-making strategy based on surveilling and manipulating user behavior (Zuboff). Relatedly, Gary Hall questions whether increasing importance of academic engagement with social media (an optional, but nonetheless important tool of public scholarship) is a feature of the growing precarity of academic labor, in what he calls the “ubercification of the university” (2016). Though these issues are difficult to avoid even when not participating in public scholarship, they are
worth considering when choosing tools, creating guidelines for public participation in your project, or asking student to participate as well.

**Conclusion - Values Matter**

One definition of public scholarship is “...enriching research, creative activity, and public knowledge; enhancing curriculum, teaching and learning; preparing educated and engaged citizens; strengthening democratic values and civic responsibility; addressing and helping to solve critical social problems; and contributing to the public good” (*What Is Public Scholarship?*). These activities often arise from values that are supplementary to those we inherit from the academy. Pointing to the important work of the HumMetricsHSS project, “Rethinking humane indicators of excellence in the humanities and social sciences” (humetricshss.org), we argue that public scholarship should align with values like respect, equity, social justice, open knowledge, and principled leadership. For example, performing equity as a core value, Dr. Cara Burnidge, a scholar of American Religious History, developed a service learning course in partnership with a local ethnic minority group to build a leadership skills development for high school-aged students from that community (*Syllabus - American Religion and Refugees*).

Enacting these and related values through our scholarly pursuits is the cause of public scholarship, especially in the humanities.

To be certain, participation in public scholarship involves negotiating a broad range of technical, ethical, and professional issues. On the whole, however, public scholarship offers scholars exciting opportunities to broaden the reach of their research, contribute to the public good, and
elevate the visibility, influence, and significance of humanities in the public eye. What is most exciting is that the future of public scholarship is still largely unknown. In some sense, the future of scholarship’s significance and survival relies on the experimentation and participation with public scholarship today.

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**Resources**


