



The Something We Can Do

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I had no plans to be a public scholar. I became one, nonetheless, in September 2002. That month my promotion to Associate Professor with tenure at the University of Washington became official. The same month the UW's alumni magazine published a story about my research on US news coverage that followed the September 11 terrorist attacks of one year earlier. A couple of graduate students and I had found that the American press uncritically waved the flag and supported the federal government's military response, beginning in Afghanistan. In our research, we offered modest critiques of what we called an overly deferential, "patriotic press". This analysis was propelled by a belief that undergirds my interest in political communication—that independent journalism is crucial for democracy. For some alumni, however, this work smacked of anti-Americanism. Several fired off angry emails expressing a wish that the university sever its ties with me. I was taken aback, and I considered it ironic because two of my co-authors were active-duty officers in the US military attending graduate school on scholarships. Soon criticisms of my work made their way into the stone-throwing world of talk radio and Internet blogs, and I was pulled into the public arena whether I wanted to be or not. It was a shock—and a jolt of energy. Years earlier I had been a journalist, feeding off the adrenaline of news reporting. This feeling returned with the dustup over my research. I was back in the public conversation, writing, talking, defending ideas . . . *engaging*. It felt good. Even better, it felt right.

What commenced was a transformation of my mindset. I now regularly write op-ed essays for newspapers as well as for internet forums, and receive plenty of emails when I do (the public, whether angry or delighted, always writes!). I deliver talks and engage in conversations in settings that range from lecture halls to union halls, from household living rooms to outdoor fairs and festivals to religious sanctuaries. I lead day-long public workshops on political communication with grassroots activists, curious citizens, and political leaders. And I have worked for

causes and on electoral campaigns, sometimes side by side with students of mine. To be clear, I do these things in addition to my responsibilities as a faculty member. I thrive on the dynamic discovery process involved in teaching, and I publish research in peer-reviewed journals because I find it intellectually energizing and I believe in the scholarly enterprise. It's as if I have two jobs, one as a professor and one as a citizen. I used to believe that the former amply encompassed the latter, but today I think differently. The teaching and research that occur in university settings matter tremendously, but these institutions are the educational equivalent of gated communities. Not all people can or want to gain entrance. I am now committed to working with people on both sides of the gates.

Growing Pains

My outlook crystallized with a book that documented and critiqued the religious rhetoric of the Bush administration and the response of US news media between September 11, 2001, and the Iraq War in spring 2003.¹ I published portions of this research in academic journals, yet thought a book might reach a wider audience. It did: the book came out smack in the middle of the 2004 presidential election, and it gained public attention in a manner well beyond any of my publications in academic outlets. I was invited to speak in a number of public contexts. I wrote op-eds for leading newspapers and for sites around the internet. I was interviewed by leading national and international reporters. I learned to speak in sound bites and experienced the terror of being interviewed live by unsympathetic broadcast anchors. Students studying abroad said they saw me on television in Hungary. A colleague heard me on the BBC. My sister caught me on CNN. It felt like I went from 0 to 60 overnight. My life has not stayed at this Chomskyian pace, but neither has it returned to idle: it's more like I am going 40 or so with moments of overdrive. It turns out that news media and the public have an insatiable interest in religion and politics—and for good reason, because their intertwining profoundly matters, especially in a nation as powerful as the United States. I fully realize that I just happen to be caught in something big. Still, I am part of the conversation.

I did not realize, though, how challenging all of this can be. In particular, two aspects of public scholarship caught me off guard. The first is the nature of the conversation. In the research culture of academia, disagreements and emotions tend to be couched in genteel terms and nuanced positions are prized. Not everyone adheres to these rules of engagement, but among scholars it is uncommon to tell someone straight out “You’re wrong”, it is even more rare to exhibit strong emotion, and the best answer almost always is “You know, I don’t think there’s any one right answer”. The underlying dimension that connects these pieces

is a posture of detachment, an I-just-study-this, I'm-not-overly-invested-in-how-this-turns-out positionality. I have found that the general public despises such aloofness—because they rightly recognize it as a position of privilege. In contrast, for those who turn out to hear or talk with scholars, the topics at hand often are everyday realities. Here's one example: I am interested in how US politicians and news media have responded to the rising power of Christian conservatives in recent decades. For me, this is what I study. But for citizens it is far more. As a result, it is true yet inadequate for me to tell a concerned parent that the push by some politicians to have biblical creationism taught alongside evolution in public schools is a political maneuver; for this parent, the issue cuts to the core of their values and what their child's future looks like. Detached, nuanced analysis doesn't cut it for them in such moments.

A second lesson I have learned is that talking with the public requires a process of translation: one in which complex ideas are converted into words, images, and examples unburdened by scholarly jargon. Such a public voice is perceived by some academics to be a “dumbing down”, a stripping away of sophisticated intellectual material in order to reach a lowbrow public. I see this process differently. Average citizens don't speak the language of the academy for simple reasons: they haven't spent years learning it, or perhaps they did but now they don't like such communication. If I genuinely want to talk with them, I need to work at developing a common vocabulary. Sometimes this occurs only through painful trial and error. When my book was published, I was convinced that my pre-graduate school work as a journalist and my position as a professor of Communication gave me an edge in writing in a style comfortable for the public. Surely I could do this, I thought. Then a friend and public ally gently asked one day over lunch if I was open to some feedback. I promptly was informed that portions of the book were tough sledding—I believe the word she used was “inaccessible”. When I heard something similar from another friend, I broke into a cold sweat. By the time a third person shared this view, it was time to either find new friends or realize that while my intentions were good, I still had miles to go to become a *public* scholar.

In both cases I underestimated my immersion in the culture of academia. When citizens become confused or frustrated with our detachment and nuanced positions, big words and five-semicolon sentences, our tendency is to dismiss the public as inferior. This is a mistake of the first order. When a doctor explains a disease in terms incomprehensible to a patient or exhibits an impersonal bedside manner, we recognize that the blame resides with the doctor. When a lawyer offers an inscrutable legal assessment to a client or expresses little concern for the person behind the case, we know the lawyer is at fault. These professionals offer something that the public wants, indeed even needs,

and they have a responsibility to deliver it in a useful manner. It's no different with scholars. We have frameworks, ideas, insights—all of which engender unique vantage points, ones marked by reflections that the average citizen does not have the time or inclination to undertake. In turn, we have a duty, a social responsibility, to offer these perspectives in lay terms for those who are interested. Please allow me to put this in distinctly personal terms. I am a tenured professor at a major university, with a modest-but-comfortable salary funded by taxpaying citizens. I live in a highly affluent nation that is the world's leading superpower. In short, I am a walking embodiment of privilege. It is not acceptable for me to write for and teach only the few who attend my university or read the academic journals I publish in. I owe the public more.

People and Hope

My faculty appointment is in the Department of Communication, which was formed from two academic units in 2002. In creating the Department, faculty in the former units considered our joint strengths, looked at trends in education, and contemplated what might be our unifying principles. An idea emphasized by the Re-Envisioning the PhD Project, funded by Pew Charitable Trusts, caught our attention: the importance of preparing graduate students for a range of careers, including many outside the academy. With only a modest sense of where this might lead us, we created a series of mini-seminars on professional pathways and installed a core graduate class titled "Community scholarship and public life". Known as The Public Scholarship Course, this is a defining piece of our program: it attracts students, has forced faculty to decide how public scholarship matters for promotion and other institutional rewards, and serves as the ever-present nudge that all institutions need. I took my first crack at teaching the course in 2007—and wrote this essay while I did so, with students offering thoughts in response.² My students and I conducted workshops with local teenagers, worked on translating academic ideas into a public voice, and pursued teaching and research opportunities with grade-school children, university alumni, and a nonprofit environmental organization. At all times the emphasis was on talking with and listening to people who are not university faculty or students—that is, those who don't experience the world as an abstract curiosity that compels systematic analysis. Such interactions reminded us, deeply reminded us, of a crucial truth: there are people behind the data.

This is a point I have learned over and over in workshops on political strategy and communication that I conduct with a University of Washington colleague. The two of us work together because we enjoy and learn from one another, and also because we find the solidarity empowering. Early in our partnership we hit upon an effective way to

end our workshops—by invoking three moments that changed the course of history: the writing of the Declaration of Independence, the refusal by Rosa Parks to give up her seat on a bus, and the wearing of a red ribbon to bring a visibility to the AIDS crisis. In these instances, my colleague and I say, people accomplished something momentous by embracing the moment at hand. These individuals did what they could, when they had the chance. Following a workshop one Saturday, a participant noted that Rosa Parks could not have had the same impact sitting on her front porch; instead, she had to get on a bus and, with the support of like-minded others, demand to be treated with dignity. It was a learning moment I carry with me and share with others. I am compelled to leave the safety of my academic porch, to enter the public arena and to take a position. On the wall of my office I have framed these words of Helen Keller: “I am only one; but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something; I will not refuse to do the something I can do”. Perhaps that is what defines a public scholar: a determination to do the something that we can do.

In the end, my goal is to help people and organizations understand how political and media systems work. With such insight, all of us can better make sense of why certain political and news messages emerge, why some of these persuade the public and shape policy, and why some gain no traction whatsoever. In the ideal world, individuals equipped with this knowledge might learn to navigate systems effectively—or, in the best of all outcomes, to find ways to make them more democratic. More knowledge is always better. Even still, the best public scholarship is about more than the imparting of knowledge; it’s also about providing hope, even inspiration. Hope is a word that is almost entirely absent from the academic lexicon. Why? Because to talk of hope suggests that we might care, that we might be genuinely invested in the material that we research and teach about. Public scholarship and hope go hand in hand. When scholars highlight opportunities for social change, we offer hope. When scholars help people to negotiate systems in ways that more fully honor their humanity, we offer hope. When scholars provide tools that allow people to take greater control over personal and cultural choices, we offer hope. And when scholars drop our detachment and adopt an ethic of engagement, we offer hope. It is this emphasis—on the belief that together we can build a better world, a more perfect union of humanity—that drives me toward public scholarship.

The rewards can be great for all involved. I’ll conclude by providing one example. I was invited in 2005 to speak at the western region meeting for the Democratic Party National Committee (DNC). The DNC was looking for insights about how to promote the party’s ideals. Democrats had lost control of the US Congress to the Republican Party in 2002, and the Democratic candidate was defeated in the US presidential election in 2004 for the seventh time in 10 elections. There were signs, however,

that the western United States was trending increasingly Democratic, a potential shift that was part of a “50-state strategy” launched by new party chair Howard Dean.³ Now Democratic leaders in 13 western US states—the area of the nation in which I lived—needed ideas. I realized that I had some. This represented a new threshold for me: activity with a distinctly partisan bent. I worked on how best to communicate my thoughts and ideas. I decided not only to share some research findings and reflections, the typical scholarly approach, but also to bring a list of suggestions for the party leaders—a short, bullet-pointed list. I opened with a story about my family’s past support for the Democratic Party, to show that I cared. And I put my presentation into a simple-to-digest visual format and showed a video clip to illustrate my claims. A year earlier, I would have done none of these. I may not even have accepted the invitation to speak.

That presentation initiated a dynamic set of relationships. I now am asked to do workshops with Democratic Party officials and candidates on effective communication techniques. For these, I share both the findings of my research and the translations I undertake in my public engagement. In exchange, I have gained a window into the strategic processes that drive American politics—a core component of what I study in my scholarly work. These insights have produced new research findings, which in turn provide material for my academic and public scholarship. In addition, through these contacts some of my students have had the chance to research and work in political campaign contexts. And one final unexpected thing has occurred: along the way I lost and then developed anew my sense of professional identity. Was I a professor who was sticking his foot in the public waters of politics? Was I becoming a political hack who happened to have a good day job at a university? Public scholarship, like any unforeseen or untraditional career move, provided an opportunity for personal and professional reflection. That’s never bad. This is who I have decided I am: an educator whose classroom is much bigger than I expected and where the learning flows in multiple directions from many sources. It’s the road less traveled, and I’m fortunate to have found it.

Endnotes

¹ The book is *God Willing? Political Fundamentalism in the White House, the “War on Terror,” and the Echoing Press* (2004, London: Pluto Press).

² For their contributions to my thinking about public scholarship, I wish to thank Peg Achterman, Fahed Al-Sumait, Vanessa Au, Laura Busch, Toby Campbell, Carol Coe, Damon Diccico, Deen Freelon, Valerie Gilbert, Kristin Gustafson, Tabitha Hart, Li Liu, Jamie Moshin, Michele Poff, and Penelope Sheets. In addition, special thanks to Lynne Baab and Michael Coe.

³ Dean was elected chairman of the DNC on 12 February 2005. The 50-state strategy is featured on the DNC’s website (accessed on 15 November 2006) at http://www.democrats.org/a/party/a_50_state_strategy. In Dean’s words, “Election by

election, state by state, precinct by precinct, door by door, vote by vote . . . we're going to lift our party up and take this country back for the people who built it". It's an electoral approach that clashed with some party leaders who wanted to target party resources to distinctly identified candidates and contests, rather than across all electoral contexts.

Suggested Reading

Novick P (1988) *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

McChesney RW (2007) *Communication Revolution: Critical Junctures and the Future of Media*. New York: New Press

Lakoff G (2002) *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*. 2nd edn. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

These three books influenced my thinking on public scholarship. In each of these, the authors do two things: (1) discuss an important scholarly matter in substantive terms, with careful, thoughtful analysis, and (2) offer insights for how scholars might bring their knowledge into the public arena in useful ways. It's a powerful combination, written in a compelling manner.

David Domke worked as a journalist for several newspapers in the 1980s and early 1990s, including the *Orange County Register* and *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, before earning a PhD in Mass Communication from the University of Minnesota in 1996. He is now a Professor and Head of Journalism in the Department of Communication at the University of Washington. Over the past decade his research and teaching interests have focused on the relationships among US politics, journalism, and public opinion. He is the author of *God Willing?: Political Fundamentalism in the White House, the "War on Terror," and the Echoing Press* (Pluto Press, 2004), and co-author of *The God Strategy: How Religion Became A Political Weapon in America* (Oxford University Press, 2008). In 2002 he received the University of Washington's Distinguished Teaching Award, the university's highest honor for teaching. In 2006, he received the Hiller Kriehbaum Under-40 Award, given by the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, for outstanding early career accomplishments. And in 2006 he also was named the Washington state Professor of the Year by the Council for Advancement and Support of Education and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.