Sending Signals from the Ivory Tower:  
Barriers to Connecting Academic Research to the Public  

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The ivory tower. The words could conjure an idyllic image from a Walt Disney fairytale. After all, the elegant image of an ivory tower first appeared as poetry in the Bible’s *The Song of Solomon*. Later in Charles-Augustin Saint-Beuve’s poem, “Thoughts of August,” it describes another poet, Alfred deVigny, who was said to have shut himself in an ivory tower.¹ Yet this term is often used as an insult rather than an ideal. Even Webster’s Dictionary defines “ivory tower” in a negative light as “an impractical often escapist attitude marked by aloof lack of concern with or interest in practical matters or urgent problems,” a “secluded place that affords the means of treating practical issues with an impractical often escapist attitude; especially: a place of learning.”² In this definition, the beauty of seclusion is twisted into something out of touch, unconcerned, aloof. The concept of the ivory tower should work two ways, representing both a place of refuge for contemplation and a place idealistically removed from the painful realities of everyday life. But, most troubling is the inclusion of the final phrase: “a place of learning.” In colloquial terms, the ivory tower is often used to refer to academia with more disdain than respect.

As much as the image of the ivory tower gets tossed around as both ideal and insult, some academics do not want to be disconnected from urgent problems or practical issues; they do not want to be solely confined to a tower, no matter how lofty. Instead, some scholars envision themselves as public scholars, committed to connecting their academic research to people outside of “the tower.” Public scholarship can take on different appearances—publishing research results in popular media, consulting with businesses or the government, conducting public workshops, or making public presentations. Regardless of form, public scholarship
includes an overt effort by an academic to connect scholarship to people outside of the academy. But wanting to be a public scholar does not instantly make it so. Academics who want to connect their scholarship to outside publics face a number of challenges from inside and outside of academia.

To gain a sense of the barriers facing public scholars, I conducted interviews with people inside and outside of academia to understand multiple barriers to public scholarship. Communication professors at the University of Washington and two other institutions talked about their personal orientation to public scholarship and their perceived challenges. I also interviewed a newspaper editor and university news and information specialist to understand how they react to academics attempting to publish their research in popular media.

**Content**

The first barrier to making academic research accessible to the public is the content of research itself. Much of the research done on university campuses focuses on narrow sub-fields of disciplines that the public may not even be aware of—like critical discourse analysis, comparative history of ideas, or the ethnography of communication. As Robert Roseth, University of Washington News and Information Director, sums up, “Frankly a lot of the work done [at the university] is not fit for public consumption. Perhaps the most overused word is significance; it just gets tossed around. But the real questions are 1. What does it signify? and 2. What does it signify to whom?” Research may represent a significant contribution to an academic discussion on structuration theory, for example, and at the same time mean absolutely nothing to anyone outside of academe. This is not an indictment of the research itself, but it does set up the first challenge to public scholarship **the intended public must need the content of the research.**
But sometimes even relevant or interesting content is not enough to sell research results to the media. In publishing academic research, peer review sets the standards for publication; the decision to publish an article in a newspaper or magazine is less transparent. “Academic writing is a lot easier because the work is judged on its scholarly soundness and contribution to a research literature,” said Robert Huesca, Assistant Professor of Communication at Trinity University in Texas. “That is a lot more transparent than writing for popular editors whose interests are not known publicly.” In general, editors are looking for a compelling story, research that is unique. And sometimes research results alone create a story. Seattle Times Metro Editor Jim Simon states, “Pure science sometimes really breaks new news that appears to be scientifically significant. It is much harder to get the same effect with liberal arts research.” This is not to say that social science research results never get covered as news stories— it does—but it happens less often than in other disciplines. Regardless of the discipline, this sets another challenge for public scholars: academic research must tell a story to work as news.

If certain disciplines are more likely to break news, are certain research methodologies also more palatable to the media? Not necessarily. According to Robert Roseth, media do not require a specific mode of conducting research. In fact, they may not even focus on the method of research in the news coverage. For example, University of Washington researcher John Gottman developed a mathematical formula that predicted the success of marriage based on the presence of several relationship factors. Rather than go into the quantitative findings of the research, the media picked up on the simple idea of prediction combined with the qualitative measures of a marriage. Media tend to look to qualitative research for a “poster child” that puts a face on a social problem such as high school delinquency. The researcher might put a reporter in touch with a study participant directly or provide a first-hand account of a story from the
perspective of a participant observer. Nonetheless, Editor Jim Simon stated, “Statistical results are the easiest to digest.” He pointed to fields like medicine and science to show the types of research results that are generally picked up by the media because of the content and the direct findings.

The findings in academic research are carefully qualified, situated in a larger context of existing research and theory. “Academics are cautious, qualified, moderated, and tempered based on a gazillion different factors,” said Patricia Moy, Associate Professor of Communication at the University of Washington. In translating research for the public, scholars need to get around the tendency to qualify everything. Jim Simon says that research does not have to be conclusive, but it does need to come to an easily understood point. Herein lies another barrier: **research needs to reach an easily understood point without too much qualification.**

Unfortunately, media sometimes take the liberty of making the point easier to understand than it should be. Given the constraints on media personnel to deliver a palatable product, sometimes academic research findings are reduced to the point of misrepresentation. “Academics have enormous mistrust of the media for simplifying and misusing academic findings,” said Simon, “and for good reason.” This mistrust makes some academics more than wary of going to the popular press: it makes them distain the whole process. The things that sell to the media lose their nuance and become generalizations, which is more than just an inconvenience—“it’s antithetical to what academics do,” according to Patricia Moy. To combat oversimplification and misrepresentation, some public scholars choose to only work with specific mediums such as a print media where they feel they can be better represented. Nonetheless, this presents another obstacle: **academics need to be aware of the potential to be misrepresented by the media.**
Institutional pressure

The comment that simplification of academic research is “antithetical to what academics do” suggests a larger barrier to public scholarship: distain for popularizers from within academia. Robert Roseth senses that there may be a “prejudice against popularizers,” that even active public scholars might not have been willing to disseminate information as junior faculty.

Certainly, junior faculty face a variety of pressures, the biggest one being the limited time before going up for tenure. University of Washington Assistant Professor Kirsten Foot noted, “The genres of presentation that are most effective for communicating research findings to the public are sometimes very different than those required for academic publications, and doing both kinds can require a lot more time, energy, and creativity than doing ‘just’ academic publications.” In addition to the time required to adapt research for public audiences, public scholarship generally does not get a faculty member tenure. Mara Adelman, currently an assistant professor of communication at Seattle University, produced a video as part of her ethnographic research on Bonadventure House, an AIDS treatment facility. Before going up for tenure at a large Midwest institution, a colleague pointedly asked her how a documentary could be evaluated as research. “The hegemony of print is so powerful,” Adelman remarked. Given her experiences, she would not encourage a junior faculty member to focus on making scholarship public until going up for tenure. Otherwise, the faculty member basically has to do double the work because a scholar will only be evaluated based on academic publishing. Another lesson emerges: academics must consider time constraints, especially before receiving tenure.

UW Associate Professor of Communication David Domke thinks that the pressure against publishing only comes if popular publication replaces scholarly publications. This pressure happens even at higher levels of academia. Take for instance the case of Cornell West
at Harvard who came under pressure when he stopped doing academic scholarship in favor of popular publication.

Nonetheless, Mara Adelman maintains that all modes of pubic scholarship are not equal. “I got invited to be on Oprah. Why do you not see a serious scholar on that type of program? Part of it is format and the tendency to rely on sound bytes, but I was told to absolutely never do it. It was told me that I’ll become the biggest joke in the field.” She perceives support within academia for “prestigious, elite” public scholarship, such as publishing in *The New York Times*.

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“But if you want to reach the average viewer rather than elite… if you are covered in the local news, then that raises questions about your credibility as a scholar.” A warning emerges:

**researchers should consider that certain kinds of public scholarship might appear less credible to academic colleagues.**

**Academic Integrity**

Whereas some academics might look down on a scholar for appearing in popular venues, the assumption is that the integrity of the research itself is not affected. This is not necessarily the case when an academic does consulting work for a private business, lobbying group, or the government. “Sometimes funders that support public scholarship want scholars to generate findings that support a particular point of view or policy stance,” said Kristen Foote. This raises issues of integrity concerning who controls the information and how it might be used.

Richard Kielbowicz, UW Associate Professor of Communication, does not seek out consulting jobs, but he has been approached multiple times to do work compiling a history of some aspect of current media policy. He feels more comfortable working with the government than with private companies, feeling that he “can say more without needing to defend his interpretation.” Nonetheless, he is generally aware of how the reports he produces might be used.
strategically to prove a point. Luckily, he has never been put in the position of having to say something that he felt was not accurate, but he acknowledges that he has considered the ethical dilemma. Here an ethical challenge emerges: public scholars must resist the temptation to please listeners outside of academia who might benefit from the conclusions found in research.

Public (mis)perceptions

In addition to academic pressures, scholars sometimes face a tough audience in the general public. Sometimes the media and the public are set in their thoughts about a given topic or idea. Robert Huesca has tried and failed to get op-eds published stemming from his research on maquiladoras, large clothing factories along the US/Mexico border. He has found “popular publications are fairly entrenched in stereotypes (about Mexico, global economics, international relations, etc.) and work for them has to fit some narrow predispositions.” The same principle can be said of public audiences too. Valerie Manusov, nonverbal communication researcher and associate professor of communication at the University of Washington, generally responds to groups seeking her expertise rather than initiating contact with the public. Nonetheless, she has found “predetermined beliefs that some people have about communication generally and ‘body language’ more specifically” to be a particular challenge. “Many people observe and talk about communication issues in their own lives, develop views on those, and think they know the answers. It is sometimes hard to get them to see that communication is a legitimate area of study and that the processes we study are much more nuanced and complex than they believe.” Here even the public poses a barrier: a public scholar must be prepared to counter popular public conceptions that may not be accurate.
Then why public scholarship?

Given all of the challenges facing academics that attempt to leave or at least transcend the ivory towers, why should scholars even bother? Kristin Foote offers two answers: “1. I feel a responsibility as an academic to contribute what I can to public knowledge. 2. Making efforts to communicate my research to various publics causes me to reflect differently on what I’m doing in my scholarship and why.”

Kristen Foote’s first answer reflects a philosophical dedication to contributing to the public understanding of salient issues. From a media perspective, Jim Simon stated that the Seattle Times “likes to think of the University of Washington as a resource, particularly as part of the public debate.” This argument also coincides with another justification: letting the public know how their money is being spent. In urging scholars at the University of Washington to make their research available to the public, Robert Roseth reminds professors that the public directly or indirectly pays for their research through governmental funding organizations and by paying their salaries. In turn, academics have an obligation to explain what comes of that investment.

Kristen Foote’s second reason for public scholarship suggests a direct benefit for the scholar and scholarship. Mara Adelman experienced a similar benefit from working on a cancer hotline while working on her dissertation. From her interactions with cancer patients, Mara Adelman came to better understand the relationship between uncertainty reduction and social control. For her, this experience required her to put her scholarship into practice, but it also grounded her understandings of academic theory with everyday life. This connection to people, in turn, informed her research.

These are only two justifications for public scholarship, and there are others. But together they begin to explain why some scholars want to move beyond the ivory tower. This is
not to suggest that the idea of the ivory tower should be entirely dismissed. But perhaps it should be reconsidered. As scholars seek to connect with outside publics, they demonstrate the limitations of the dictionary definition of the ivory tower. In this case, the ivory tower does not serve as a justification for removing from reality, refuge from issues of popular concern. Instead, the ivory tower is a place of learning, a place of contemplation and rigorous research. As scholars move to connect their work with the larger public, perhaps the tower can be transformed into a unique vantage point for sending valuable signals rather than just shelter for the disinterested and unengaged.

Unfortunately, for now, the stereotypes surrounding the ivory tower remain a barrier to public scholarship as the public disregards academics as out of touch or distant--sometimes even telling them to “go back to the ivory tower.” But hopefully this is only another barrier that too can be overcome by willing and ready public scholars.

**Tips for budding public scholars**

- **Learn (at least) two languages or vocabularies.** Successful public scholars need to “know how to speak and write in two voices” translating academic findings into tangible results, according to Patricia Moy. From minimizing unnecessary qualifications to avoiding technical terms, successful public scholars speak a language that the public can understand and relate to their own lives. Sometimes this may even require a scholar to adopt the vernacular of a target audience rather than addressing the general public.

- **Develop yourself as a source.** If you are interested in making your work accessible to the public, news editor Jim Simon suggests starting by developing yourself as a source. Connect with local reporters who cover your topic areas. By providing commentary on
current issues, “you are part of the debate, even if your study is not the subject of the story” says Simon.

- **Find ways to challenge existing assumptions.** Valerie Manusov suggests that scholars “call people on their views. Stick with the evidence and make arguments well grounded in evidence (of whatever form).” This strategy also increases the likelihood that information be seen as news in that it offers a new perspective not previously known to the public.

**Endnotes**


2. Webster’s Dictionary Online. <http://www.m-w.com>

3. My interviewees were chosen by a combination of proximity and personal interest. My project started with a tangentially related e-mail exchange with Robert Huesca, who provided a series of helpful comments and reflections over several e-mails. To get a better understanding about the decisions media professionals make, I sought out Richard Roseth from the University of Washington News and Information Office. I also tried to connect the media relations officer who specializes in communication, but he was out of town. I called and e-mailed eight news and opinion editors at the Seattle Times, Seattle Post-Intelligencer, and Tacoma News Tribune to solicit comments. Various contacts led me to Jim Simon. Unfortunately, two other interviews with media personnel were cancelled. Most of the faculty I interviewed are from the University of Washington Communication Department where I am a graduate student. I contacted Mara Adelman
because I was familiar with her work as a public scholar and interested in the opportunity to talk to her.

My interviews were conducted in a number of ways. Robert Huesca, Valerie Manusov, and Kristin Foote responded to questions via e-mail. I conducted phone interviews with Jim Simon and Mara Adelman. I did short 15-20 minute face-to-face interviews with David Domke, Patricia Moy, and Richard Kielbowicz; I talked with Robert Roseth for 45 minutes. I thank all of these participants for their time and thoughtful comments.