Can the Digital Revolutionize Academic Scholarship?

Review by Natalia Kovalyova

Going Public: A Guide for Social Scientists
By: Arlene Stein and Jessie Daniels
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A decade ago, Samuel Kernel shook the field of political science by reporting on structural changes in presidential politics. He showed that in order to advance their legislative agenda, American presidents had started rallying public support. He called this new powerful tool of presidential communication *going public*. Now, a similar development appears to be rocking the academic world, pushing the boundaries of what accepted scholarship is, as young scholars take to online fora instead of academic journals to make their research public. Yet, this enthusiasm for public scholarship is not universally embraced in academia and a decision to "go public" with one's scholarship comes with a price.

To examine the consequences of such a decision, Arlene Stein and Jessie Daniels in their new book *Going Public: A Guide for Social Scientists*, outline the existing digital options for communicating research, weigh their pros and cons, and issue a number of warnings about a perceived schism between the new and the traditional models of scholarship. The authors keep within the realm of their home discipline of sociology, but the arguments they advance ring true for other disciplines as well.

Scholars are socialized to speak and write in a particular way, they posit, mostly to an audience of their fellow academics. As a result, the people who need to hear about research results most urgently remain outside the traditional routes of scholarly communication. Moreover, when research is communicated by the middle man, aka reporters, a lot gets "lost in translation." Therefore, cutting out the middle man and entering the public debate directly via new communication channels, such as social media, seems like a viable remedy.

After remediating the problem of unskillful interpretation and, effectively, calling for the elimination of the division of labor between researchers and popularizers (including reporters), the authors proceed with a suggestion for scholars to "unlearn" the academic article as a single form of scholarly communication and to develop their voice as story-tellers (Chapter One). They describe multiple venues where research stories could be told for public consumption – from newspaper op-eds to digital magazines to Facebook (Chapter Two). Unfortunately, what makes for a good story and what narrative strategies work best for tales supported by research falls outside the scope of the book. Instead, the authors' recommendations remain mostly prohibitive, warning scholars about what not to do ("Do not write whodunit," "Do not load the book with footnotes, tables, charts," etc.) (Chapter Three).

In Chapter Four, the authors focus on the capacity of digital technology to expand one's networks and to shape ideas through conversation, a capacity that can undermine the reign of what they call *a legacy model of scholarship* especially because it is coupled with a "foundational concern with the world beyond the academy" (94). The very existence of a digital model, the authors believe, demonstrates that scholarship is "undergoing a profound change" (96). Yet, in their treatment, the major change is evident in a peer review process, allegedly a "deeply flawed" element of the legacy model (95), and is accompanied by the increased speed of surveying the extant literature on the topic and the increased speed of writing. Regrettably, the authors elaborate neither on the causes of the "brokenness" of the legacy model nor on the validity of the digital solution, simply stating that digital scholarship undergoes "rigorous peer reviews" (94).

In Chapter Five, Stein and Daniels argue that "going public" introduces a different model of being an academic, with a different type of audience to address. Here, the authors offer words of caution to non-tenured academics. Disseminating one's research to a wider audience and achieving tenure by publishing it in academic journals do not fit under one tent. Taking one route excludes, as far as they could tell, the other; hence their advice is to know one's institution and its tenure requirements before stepping into the shoes of a public scholar. Further on, they address a dark facet of "going public," namely, abusive comments and hate mail and suggest growing thicker skin as a remedy to the situation (Chapter Six). Finally, Chapter Seven turns to the issue of measuring research impact. Flawed as the existing measures are, a flurry of research tracking sites threatens to substitute attention (that is, views, likes, downloads, and other indicators of visibility) for citations as a measure of worth, which, again,

will not sit well with one's tenure committee.

For a book about the ongoing changes in academic scholarship, "*Going Public*" is surprisingly ambivalent in regards to its own goal of writing to its intended audience of untenured assistant professors and advanced graduate students crafting their academic identities. If the authors aim to inspire these young scholars to "go public," their advice is too generic and growing obsolete by the hour, given today's rapid technological advances. If they want to prevent the faint-hearted from "going public," they offer little to those who are passionate about solving real-world problems but still adhere to the legacy model. Moreover, several serious omissions in the description of the current academic landscape prevent this book from advancing our understanding of how knowledge is produced and disseminated in the digital age.

First of all, digital formats can hardly drive change in academia by themselves. A host of grant-making institutions, federal agencies, think-tanks, and other powerful decision-makers shift the direction of research, prioritizing certain fields and projects. Another heavy-weight gatekeeper (or kingmaker, if you will) not accounted for in the book is the publishing industry whose paywalls, subscription fees, and open access requirements intricately regulate the flow of information, and whose views about what will sell shape the public understanding of what scholars care to study.

Second, as described by the authors, "going public" resembles a new mode of disseminating research rather than a new model of doing it. None of the examples of public scholarship mentioned in the book suggest new innovations in methodology or analytical techniques, nor do they shake the epistemic foundations of academic research. Thus, a proposition of a new, digital model of scholarship remains unsubstantiated, much like the claim that social media allows for "a new arrangement of colleagues" (109) and nurtures productive collaborations. Without the illustrations of successful, say, Twitter- or Facebook-based collaboration, these statements about technical affordances read as unrealized promises.

Third, in a climate of growing tensions around what counts as scholarship, it is vital to hear from all stake-holders. Sadly, the book does not give voice either to those who follow a legacy model or to tenure committees with their alleged arguments against public scholarship. In the absence of data about current tenure requirements at various institutions, the incompatibility of the two models remains an

academic "urban legend" while in reality, digital scholarship may be well on its way to being normalized as an acceptable form of academic work.

Fourth, the book's initial vision of an eager public craving the latest research news is shattered by the consequent accounts of hostility that scholars endure on social media platforms. Unfortunately, a heightened chance of encountering incivility is not the only negative aspect of digital communication. Fragmentation of the public into filter bubbles effectively undermines the promise of broad dissemination of information, research-based or otherwise.

Finally, Stein and Daniels' recommendations to deploy narrative in public scholarship reveal a poor estimate of the public's discursive repertoire. Yet, even if story-telling is indeed a discursive package that works wonders, educating the public about research and teaching it to interpret research results makes for a viable alternative solution that would undermine the middle man that Stein and Daniels picture on the opening pages.

Natalia Kovalyova (Ph.D., UT Austin) studies the relationships between discourse and power in a variety of contexts from presidential communication to academic writing. Her most recent research focuses on the role of the media in producing, maintaining, mending, or challenging social cohesion. She is a member of the National Communication Association, Rhetoric Society of America, American Political Science Association, and the International Society for Political Psychology.