

*Singing to a different tune is easier once you have the skill to complement the willingness.*

**Phillip Vannini** ([http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/blog-contributors/#Phillip Vannini](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/blog-contributors/#PhillipVannini)) isn't the only academic who is trying to make research popular. Here, he explains how he has made a rule to produce a video, blog post or popular version of every article he publishes.



"I know a little bit about biology, and a little more about psychology..."

...but as a result of my traditional social scientific training there are many things I know very little or nothing about. For example, I know little about web design, public relations, or about photography and film-making. Neither applied communication nor visual arts were included in my doctoral studies curriculum, so these days I know better than to try these activities myself, like an amateur would. Instead I make it a point of seeking out graduate research assistants who have professional training and practical know-how in information dissemination, promotion, and presentation.

What for, you might ask? As the Canada Research Chair (<http://www.chairs-chaire.gc.ca/chairholders-titulaires/profile-eng.aspx?profileId=2753>) in Innovative Learning and Public Ethnography (<http://publicethnography.net/projects/public-ethnography-innovative-learning-depth-statement>) my job is to find ways to make research—qualitative research in general and ethnographic research in particular—popular. As popular as it can be. My student research assistants' job is to work with me on all aspects of knowledge mobilization. As communication students this means they get to cultivate the skills that their future careers will demand of them. So I don't ask them to do what I already know how to do. There are no interviews to transcribe, literature reviews to write up, or data to code in their contracts. I can do that by myself. Instead, there are media relations, visual productions, website building, and many other tasks intended to share far and wide the outcomes of my research.

Why am I doing this? Traditional research dissemination, as we all know, entails linear processes of information exchange whereby academic knowledge providers typically produce technical communication meant for like-minded audiences. When attempting to reach the general public, research generally appeals to mediators such as teachers, journalists, community leaders, policy-makers, and practitioners. Direct academic-to-general-public communication is rarely done. While this model has at times proved beneficial, its shortcomings are well recognized. The mobilization of knowledge requires more effective communication that ensures that vast and diverse general audiences learn directly from new research.

Students inspire me to communicate differently with the general public, and hopefully more effectively. Take for example this article (<http://berghahn.publisher.ingentaconnect.com/content/berghahn/trans/2012/00000002/00000001/art00003>) of mine on off-grid living. As an academic journal article, it isn't exactly easy to access for the general public. So Jonathan Taggart and I made it a point of "translating" it for a broader audience. The result is a short video-enriched ethnographic magazine piece (<http://thetyee.ca/Life/2012/06/14/Living-Off-the-Grid-On-Lasquet/>), which—last time I checked with the editor of this well-read magazine—has been accessed over 10,000 times.

I've now made it a personal rule of publishing one such piece for every journal article or academic book chapter I write. And with the help of public relation experts like my students Lindsay Vogan and Kate O'Rourke other media too—like radio stations (<http://www.cbc.ca/player/Radio/Local+Shows/Manitoba/Radio+Noon+-+Manitoba/ID/2251719393/>) and newspapers (<http://www.theguardian.pe.ca/News/Local/2012-06-11/article-3005205/Life-unplugged/1>)—receive alerts any time a research story affect is of interest to their coverage area.

Ethnography is a form of knowledge that depends on an intimate and personable approach to research. Dissatisfied with one-way dissemination, small audiences, and unimaginative representation, the practitioners of this new public ethnography aim towards practical applications and broad engagement, without eschewing analysis and theory.

Current innovative public ethnographic practices are situated within a rapidly evolving context marked by the growing availability of user-friendly technologies for conducting and communicating research, increasing acceptance of popular media- and arts-inspired research genres, a renewed understanding of the role of university-based research and teaching in informing the public sphere, and a redirection of technological and methodological innovations writ large toward goals of knowledge mobilization.

Besides trying my best to do public ethnography myself, I have been working on a new hypermedia book series (<http://www.innovativeethnographies.net/>), published by Routledge, which combines fine academic writing and web-based media material. While the books are printed as well, the e-books from this series are iPad, laptop, and tablet friendly. The websites generate traffic and attention for the book, and expand their audiences. Students in particular love to see and hear the field, rather than just read about it.

Ethnography has, across disciplines, some key qualities that make it potentially appealing to the wider public. Ethnographic prose resembles that of the novel. Ethnographic portraits of cultures, people, times, and places speak to the general public's predilection for intimate, personable, context-bound, curiosity-evoking renditions of life.

Ethnography's tackling of contemporary topics speaks to the public's need for in-depth coverage of current affairs. In my experience, working on a timely topic generates a lot of media attention, which in turn generates more attention and a wider and wider audience. For example, magazine pieces like this one (<http://www.canadiangeographic.ca/magazine/jun12/inhabitat.asp>) lead to invitations to blog for wide-distribution media, like the very popular Huffington Post ([http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/phillip-vannini-and-jonathan-taggart/livingoffgrid\\_b\\_1761450.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/phillip-vannini-and-jonathan-taggart/livingoffgrid_b_1761450.html)).

For anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes making ethnographic work more accessible and accountable requires pleasant writing, but also collaboration with journalists and the popular media. For Scheper-Hughes the news world is potentially an ally and, rather than contaminating oneself by meddling with journalists and the masses, a public ethnographer has much to gain from making one's research public with journalists' collaboration.

But willingness aside, what really makes the difference—as I stated in the opening paragraph—is a matter of skill. Once we *know how* to reach out to wider publics, then the process feels less daunting. For this reason I have edited a hypermedia “how-to” book (<http://www.popularizingresearch.net/>), which shows examples that hopefully will serve as an inspiring resource for many others.

Sometimes, I found, it just works to sing a different kind of tune...

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