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Book Review: The Perils and Promises of Public Scholarship

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The Perils and Promises of Public Scholarship

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Arlene Stein and Jessie Daniels, *Going Public: A Guide for Social Scientists*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017, 230 pages. ISBN: 978-0226364780

The authors of *Going Public: A Guide for Social Scientists* ask a key question in the book's concluding chapter: "As public scholars, how do we take the work we do and make it 'count' in ways that are legible to academic institutions?" (p. 164). The tension between work done for the academy and work done outside it that Arlene Stein and Jessie Daniels frame is one their audience must confront if they want to do what Stein and Daniels suggest in their short, readable, and highly practical book. This is not a new tension, but new attention has been paid to it in recent years. Concepts like public engagement, public scholarship, and civic engagement are floated by professors in different disciplines as ways in which we all can, to paraphrase the book's title, "go public." As two professors of rhetoric and composition who have begun to do that, we review this book not for its practicality—which will vary by discipline—but for the ways in which the book rhetorically framed its central message and its implications in practice. While we fault the book at times for failures in attending to certain matters, we find the book is a good introduction to the perils and practices of "going public."

One of the key failures was putting that last chapter at the end. It serves as the best argument for "going public," especially if one assumes the audience for this book doesn't see the reason for it due to narrowed institutional standards. In other words, for a group that has remained tied to academic, peer-reviewed citations as the only worthwhile assessment, the chapter makes the case for how professors can make their own case for public work. One of the chapter's key principles for doing that—"craft a narrative about your work"—is also the key advice for writing in public that the book presents throughout.

Another key failure is a lack of discussion between the labels we mentioned above. Teaching social scientists to be storytellers and "writers" in the journalistic sense is good. But the book fails to capture the difference between merely writing

journalistically and the larger embodiment of what *Imagining America* called in its 2008 report "Scholarship in Public" a "coherent, purposeful sequence of activities" of scholarship that "contributes to the public good and yields artifacts of public and intellectual value" (Ellison & Eatman, 2008, p. iv). That weakness highlights another, lesser one: the attack on journalism from the authors. Daniels and Stein want to bypass the "middleman" (p. 13)—reporters—and have professors write their own stories. To make that case, the authors play on negative stereotypes of journalists—they only want "clicks," they oversimplify academic debates, and they are not " beholden" to professional codes like social scientists (p. 12). While some (or even many) academics may believe these criticisms, the book amplifies them in order to tell scholars to write as journalists. On the one hand, the book criticizes journalism, but then spends at least two chapters telling its readers how to write as a journalist.

What is most interesting about this divide set up by the authors is that their advice on better writing that certainly applies to journalism also applies directly to social science academic writing. Yet the chapter only makes it seem like it applies to the former. One of the key successes is the chapter on the perils of "going public." One must not only count the institutional costs, but the public costs. We live in an age of quick and sometimes ill-informed outrage, much of it directed at professors. Trolls, guns on campus, administrative backlash, and of course academics "eating their own" (p. 148) are deep issues to think about when thinking about "going public."

The book is divided into an introduction and seven other chapters. In the book's introduction, "So You Want to Go Public?" Stein and Daniels make their case for scholars—specifically their social scientist colleagues—to go public and use their expertise to speak to pressing issues. As Stein and Daniels state in their accessible and casual prose, "there's a big world out there that needs to hear from us" (p. 5). They set their book

apart from others by arguing those “rarely involve nuts-and-bolts advice about how exactly to move one’s research into public arenas” (p. 4). This animates most of their book and offers a springboard into their first chapter, “Writing Beyond the Academy.”

In this chapter, the authors offer four principles “for creating writing that can participate in lively conversations with various audiences, not just other academics” (p. 18). The third one is worth highlighting: strive for clarity and concreteness. No one would disagree that striving for clarity and concreteness is a goal worthy of op-ed columns and journal articles. But the question always present but hardly ever asked by academics who “go public” is, as Stein and Daniels point out, clear and concrete for whom? A sociologist writing of Michel Foucault’s understandings of normalization will strive for a different kind of clarity if she were to talk through Foucault at her discipline-specific conference or introduce Foucault’s theory to readers of *Wired* magazine, for example. When elucidating this principle of clarity and concreteness, the authors offer specific advice such as weeding out nominalizations, going for active over passive sentences, and establishing clear subjects and active verbs. Stein and Daniels even include a rich table titled “The Busy Academic’s Guide to Writing Concisely” (p. 26), which they borrow from the irreverent and hilarious twitter feed *Shit Academics Say* (<https://twitter.com/academicssay>).

In their second chapter, “Telling Stories About Your Research,” Stein and Daniels continue with sentence-level principles for tailoring argument and prose for a general audience. They also introduce a rhetorical feature that continues in later chapters: a paragraph by paragraph analysis of public scholarship. In this chapter, they walk through sociologist Ruth Milkman’s (2005) *New York Times* op-ed piece on organized labor. They analyze how Milkman’s paragraphs individually and collectively work as strong examples of public scholarship, suggesting they adhere to story-telling as a rhetorical feature of op-ed pieces. They conclude this chapter by arguing that writing a series of op-ed pieces provides fodder for embarking on a book-length project targeting a general audience. They tackle books in the third chapter.

In this chapter, they merge their advice on prose with their advice for navigating the sometimes-mysterious world of book publishing, from writing a proposal to connecting with an editor and publisher, to revising based on publisher and reviewer feedback. Much of the advice they

offer falls in line with similar books that seek to demystify the book publishing process, such as William Germano’s (2005) indispensable *From Dissertation to Book and Getting It Published*, also published by the University of Chicago Press. What Stein and Daniels add to this conversation is clear guidance on the difference between the prose style for academic books and the prose style for general audiences. They write: “When writing for a general audience, be mindful of the structure of sentences, paragraphs, and chapter, and how words look on each page” (p. 81). They suggest eschewing block quotes, even direct quotes at times, and encourage writers to “let your writing breathe” (p. 81).

Throughout their introduction and first three chapters, Stein and Daniels have hinted at the role digital technologies play in public scholarship. In chapter four, “The Digital Turn,” they engage directly. They succinctly define digital scholarship as that which “encompasses the disciplines included in the digital humanities, Internet studies, and digital sociology” (p. 94). At the core, this work is “rooted in twenty-first-century practices of online publication, open-access distribution, and rigorous peer-review . . . [and] steeped in a foundational concern with the world beyond the academy” (p. 94). Taken together, digital scholarship is “transforming everyday practices of creating and accumulating knowledge” (p. 94).

Continuing with the nuts-and-bolts focus of their book, Stein and Daniels spend helpful energy walking through different digital platforms for disseminating one’s work and how to manage these platforms. They describe how to set up a web presence through registering a domain name and selecting a web host. They introduce different tools that can aid the presentation and style of your blog like piktochart.com, for infographics, and memegenerator.com for memes. They then move into specific social media platforms like Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, and more specifically academic focused social media platforms like ResearchGate and Academia.edu.

They conclude this chapter by pointing readers to sites designed to increase one’s digital literacy. Lynda.com, for example, aggregates tutorial videos on a wide-range of subjects like software development, photography, web development, and graphic design. Chapter five explains how to build an audience and how a built audience helps when a scholar interested in public scholarship pitches a story to an editor or embarks on public policy work. In this frame, the authors suggest ways to understand and write “news hooks.”

The last two chapters collectively constitute Stein and Daniels's conclusion. In chapter six, "The Perils of Going Public," they detail challenges, pitfalls, and troublesome narratives that inevitably occur when academics wade into public issues. Some of the issues discussed include gun control, mass incarceration, and the removal of Confederate monuments on public land. We found this chapter particularly important and apt as media outlets across the political spectrum seem full of news reports of Professor X waging an unanticipated Twitter war against anonymous trolls in the wake of Professor X lending expertise or a fiery opinion on Topic Y. They offer encouraging words to readers who have "stumbled in public" or more importantly, those who have found unexpected fame through their work and, as a result, finding their work coming under ever greater scrutiny. To this second point, they speak to Alice Goffman's (2014) dissertation turned book *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City*, an immersive ethnographic study of a poor, black group of young men living in Philadelphia. Goffman, the daughter of famed sociologist Erving Goffman, lived among this group and following a soaring of praise from *The New York Times*, Cornel West, and many others, suddenly watched the narrative turn against her.

Ultimately, Stein and Daniels warn intrepid public scholars to "guard your privacy, know your rights—and develop thick skin" (p. 155). The final chapter offers help in tracking the effectiveness of one's public scholarship for inside the academy. Stein and Daniels remind readers to view their work through their promotion and tenure guidelines and then introduce a variety of different metrics for tracking one's work. Both ResearchGate and Academia.edu have built-in metrics for tracking data and Google Scholar can be used to track citations of one's work.

Overall the book's tone, content, and audience display well-informed authors who know what it looks like to "go public." While there are faults, they do not overtake our judgment that this book can be helpful to any academic seeking to commit themselves to public writing. And as the book argues by its scope and detail, it requires a commitment, not merely a one-time op-ed. It requires a rethinking of the relationship between academic writing and writing outside our hallowed halls.

About the Reviewers

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