Emphasizing the Scholar in Public Scholarship

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Two weeks before I started my final year as an undergraduate at the University of Virginia, I hesitantly called my parents and announced a major revelation: "I have decided not to go to law school. I want to earn a PhD in political science instead." Their responses ranged from "What are you going to *do* with *that*?" to "You grew up in a political household. Why on earth would you want to run for public office?" Their comments mirror a persistent challenge for our discipline: our failure to articulate convincingly who we are, what we do, and its relevance to issues of practical concern. That failure, however, isn't due to a lack of effort. It is inextricably connected to other trends, such as the passage of the Coburn Amendment and ongoing efforts to corporatize higher education.

Scholars have long debated the state of the discipline, with growing agreement that political science should be more publically engaged. Determining *how* that engagement should occur has been a decidedly more difficult task. APSA and its members must retreat from the Sisyphean task of repeatedly trying to defend our relevance. A more fruitful approach centers on a two-pronged strategy: (1) internal development that trains members to effectively navigate the public sphere, and (2) external dissemination of members' scholarly expertise that is buttressed by institutional support. Developing this approach is contingent on our ability to determine why public engagement should be a desirable pursuit. Other than our interest in promoting a rigorous understanding of the political process, what is the public value of political science? APSA members can and should address multiple audiences including the media, policy makers, voters, students, other academic disciplines, grassroots activists, and—to some extent—other political scientists who resist the notion of public engagement. As the landscape of higher education is rapidly changing, so must the commitment of political science to engaging *multiple* publics.

I first offer preliminary thoughts on the topic, beginning with a basic definition of public scholarship as distinct from public intellectualism. I then suggest practical ways that the profession can promote models of public engagement.

DEFINING PUBLIC SCHOLARSHIP

In a recent New York Times op-ed, Nicholas Kristof (2014) condemns professors, particularly political scientists, for hiding behind a wall of obscurity and failing to engage the public sphere. In a sobering admonition, he wrote, "In other words, to be a scholar is, often, to be irrelevant." At first glance, the Kristof piece is enough to push any graduate student to the brink of an existential crisis. Few people define their career path as a journey of irrelevance. However, the statement raises important questions: "How do we define relevance? And to whom?" Public scholars have the opportunity to define relevance in myriad ways, from shaping decisions made by policy makers to inspiring bright undergraduates to pursue a career in public service. At its core, political science rests on the study of power and conflict. It stands to reason, then, that a discipline built on examining power should promote greater understanding of how those resources are distributed.

However, the value of scholarly engagement shouldn't be confined to the public acts that Kristof mentions. Public engagement happens when producers of documentaries rely on scholars for advice about content and when scholars are called on to testify at hearings about poverty interventions. Indeed, public engagement occurs even when professors present their research to alumni gatherings attended by business executives, community organizers, development professionals, and retirees.[1]

In 2005, I was invited to give a talk to alumni that addressed some aspect of my work. It was a broad charge with one caveat: make it interesting. I obsessed over a topic that would be conducive to a catchy title that would draw people into my session. I chose to discuss the 40th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) of 1965 and its relevance to contemporary debates over protecting the franchise. I discussed the Act's extensions that protected language minorities and the growing demographic changes that elevated their importance. I also discussed how the appointment of John Roberts as Chief Justice of the United States might foretell a shift in the Supreme Court's support of the VRA, given his prior efforts in the US Department of Justice to require proof of intent in discrimination claims. Attendees were shocked to learn that despite the popularity of the phrase, "right to vote," the Constitution does not provide an affirmative right to vote. Often, the factual information that we take for granted as scholars can offer important insights for nonspecialists.

Fast-forward to the summer of 2013: one of the attendees, now a journalist, asked if I would pen a piece on the practical implications of the Supreme Court's decision in *Shelby County v. Holder* (Brown-Dean 2013a). In 2015, the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies commissioned four political scientists—Khalilah L. Brown-Dean, Zoltan Hajnal, Christina Rivers, and Ismail White—to author "50 Years of the Voting Rights Act: The State of Race in Politics" (Brown-Dean, Hajnal, Rivers, and White 2015). The report examines the impact of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 on key areas such as voter registration, turnout, racially polarized voting, office holding, and policy responsiveness. Our efforts to address key areas of American electoral behavior generated discussion among journalists, policymakers, and civil rights leaders such as Representative John Lewis and Martin Luther King III. Ismail White and I traveled to Selma, Alabama, to present the report and participate in a panel discussion during the 50th anniversary commemoration of the historic Bloody Sunday March. There, at the base of the Edmund Pettus

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Bridge, we were reminded of the enormous potential of public scholarship.

Public scholarship should satisfy a question that applies equally to traditional scholarship: So what? Scholars possess a unique skill set to address this question based on knowledge of historical trends and an awareness of future concerns. Members of our profession have long been involved in these types of activities. The issue, however, rests on how we classify this work. Does public engagement count as scholarship or service?

It's important to push back on the notion that the goal of public engagement is to churn out people who will offer opinions on any issue that comes along. Effective public scholars should be specialists who have the ability to articulate their expertise in generalist terms. This does not require that one be able to speak with deep specificity about the finer points of stop-gap funding in Congress—quite the contrary. There is, however, an inherent danger in scholars who present themselves as experts on all things remotely political. Good public scholars recognize the limits of their expertise while deploying the analytical rigor necessary to make sense of a complicated political world. Scholarship represents a tangible expression of knowledge grounded in a systematic exploration of information. Traditional scholarship in political science focuses on both process (e.g., skills development) and product (e.g., books and peer-reviewed articles); the same should be true for public scholarship. There is a need for scholars who can quickly respond to the topics of the day, but those responses are strengthened when they can be connected to long-standing questions in political science regarding power, conflict, justice, and fairness. The essence of public engagement is reflected in its connection to our teaching and scholarship. A broader vision of political science's public engagement should strive to move beyond the "talking-head" pontification that often dominates the public sphere. What sets a scholarly blog apart from an eager citizen with an opinion is a combination of both analytical rigor and factual awareness.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND THE POLITICS OF INVISIBILITY

The value of the life of the mind has always stretched beyond the individual. The task is to determine how our preoccupation with thinking is connected to the lived and imagined experiences of others. The rise to prominence of political science's own Melissa Harris-Perry is a useful example of how we might bridge the gap between the ivory tower and the public square. In a brilliant article in The Atlantic, Ta-Nehesi Coates takes Dylan Byers to task for his failure to recognize how Harris-Perry helped to redefine what it means to be a public intellectual. Coates's piece alludes to an important consideration that I hope our profession will take seriously: the tendency of uses for public scholarship to replicate many of the biases that are embedded within the broader academy.

Although many claim that public scholarship promotes diverse voices, that diversity should be qualified (Drezner 2008) (http://www.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2008/05/13/blogs_public_intellectuals_and_the_academy.). Public engagement has the opportunity to both amplify new voices and deepen our understanding of communities that often are overlooked by traditional modes of inquiry. Increasing public engagement among scholars who are members of and/or conduct research on underrepresented communities in American society is an important way to substantiate the discipline's relevance beyond the academy. Again, this is where Kristof's critique misses the point. There already is a strong cadre of scholars who have long been doing exactly what he demands.[2] For some, public engagement is a way to reconcile an internal calling to connect their scholarship to real-world problems. Others are drawn into public engagement by departments, universities, and well-intentioned community organizations eager to diversify their image and compensate for underrepresentation. How do we balance the call for public engagement against the practical demands of rigid tenure standards, which rarely allow for work that surpasses traditional markers of productivity? Does public engagement for underrepresented scholars become yet another unrequited time demand to combat invisibility, or is it viewed as a valued contribution?[3] Many of us jokingly refer to the months of February and March as the "high season." Government agencies and local elementary schools all clamor for speakers at Women's History Month and Black History Month events. APSA's endorsement of increased public engagement must speak directly to the reality that service demands already are unevenly distributed.[4]

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APSA SUPPORT

This article suggests that APSA pursue a two-pronged approach that focuses on internal development and external dissemination. To that end, I offer the following suggestions.

Train Scholars for Public Engagement

The APSA Teaching and Learning Conference has become a great venue for sharing best practices and highlighting scholarship on pedagogy. Public engagement, like teaching, is an acquired skill that should be nurtured. The association should consider sponsoring a mini-conference and/or a series of training sessions designed to connect scholars who have similar interests. An initial step may be hosting roundtables at the APSA Annual Meeting and at regional conferences that feature public scholars along with editors, journalists, and legislative staffers who can discuss strategies for public engagement.[5]

The association may consider partnering with The Op-Ed Project to host a short course before the APSA Annual Meeting.[6] The Project's emphasis on teaching participants to "preach beyond the choir" seems particularly fitting for what APSA wants to accomplish.

APSA also should create a Public Voices Fellowship that provides both training and funding for members to engage in public scholarship. Fellows would serve as public ambassadors for the profession and as peer mentors for others members entering the public sphere. Demos has a useful model in its

Emerging Voices Initiative. APSA also might develop awards and prizes that recognize public scholarship similar to the Fannie Lou Hamer Service Award, which is presented by the National Conference of Black Political Scientists at its annual meeting.

APSA also should include training and information for university department chairs about supporting public engagement and being aware of the challenges associated with this commitment.

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Commit to External Dissemination

PS: Political Science and Politics could include a public scholarship/engagement spotlight that highlights how this work is making a difference. APSA also could make better use of social media to improve the networking of a world of (public) scholars and to partner with other professional organizations, such as the American Bar Association and the National Association of Black Journalists. By maintaining an online directory of interested scholars who are searchable by specialty and geographic location, APSA could serve as a clearinghouse and speakers bureau.

APSA also might sponsor a number of "TED-esque" public talks around the country that highlight one or several professors from different subfields. These events could address pressing political issues with regional importance (e.g., a talk in California about the Supreme Court and marriage equality) or national significance (e.g., debating the Second Amendment post–Newtown and Aurora). An initial step might be creating podcasts or updating a YouTube page or Vine account with short snippets on issues such as federalism and marijuana use reform.

CONCLUSION

As scholars, we often take for granted the relevance of our expertise. We assume that the average American is either uninterested or ambivalent. However, more than any other discipline, we should articulate the practical consequences of the actions and inactions of government. It wasn't until I was asked to testify before the Connecticut State Legislature about inequality in the criminal justice system that I understood how the engagement of political scientists could promote a more efficient political system. I realized that without the credentials of having a PhD and spending the better part of a decade studying the politics of punishment, I would have been dismissed as simply another bleeding-heart liberal who stands outside a prison holding a flickering candle during an execution (no offense intended to candleholders). However, my opposition was based on a multivariate analysis that demonstrates how the death penalty doesn't make us safer, doesn't deter criminal activity, and doesn't guarantee closure for victims' families. By emphasizing the *scholar* in public scholarship, APSA can promote both internal training and external engagement. ■

NOTES

1. One Day University has capitalized on citizens' interest in lifelong learning by hosting full-day sessions featuring award-winning university professors from a variety of fields. Participants pay a "tuition fee" to attend the lectures, and professors are compensated for their participation. Critics question whether this type of program discourages professors from participating in more university-specific events that often count as "service" rather than public scholarship. More information is available at www.onedayu.com.
2. Political scientists including Lester Spence (see www.lesterspence.com), Julia Jordan-Zachary (see www.womanistscholar.blogspot.com), and Duchess Harris (see www.duchessharris.com) have a long history of public engagement via the blogosphere. Others including Jason Johnson (see www.drjasonjohnson.com) and Christina Greer (see www.ed.ted.com) frequently shape media discussions about political issues of interest. Janni Aragon (see www.janniaragon.wordpress.com) uses social media to promote innovations in pedagogy and scholarship. This is not an exhaustive list but it provides examples of various scholars who actively engage the public.
3. See, for example, Ernest J. Wilson. 1985. "Why Political Scientists Don't Study Black Politics but Sociologists and Historians Do." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 18 (3): 600–06.
4. These demands have a direct connection to work-life balance, career satisfaction, and overall productivity. APSA should consider sponsoring a study that would bring empirical evidence to bear on this question of whether there are demographic differences in both requests for public engagement and impact.
5. The 2013 Mini-Conference for Women of Color in Political Science included a session that featured two scholars who have pursued very different approaches to public engagement. Victoria de Francesco Soto discussed her engagement as a television personality and I described how my scholarship has been used to shape state-level death-penalty–abolition campaigns. The session was well received by attendees and easily could be replicated on a larger scale.
6. An overview of the Op-Ed Project's core seminars is available at www.theopedproject.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=61&Itemid=76.

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