

# How the Scholars Strategy Network Helps Academics Gain Public Influence

*Theda Skocpol*

Many American professors are looking for innovative ways to engage policymakers and fellow citizens—and the boldest new endeavor is the fast-growing Scholars Strategy Network. Since 2011, “SSN” (as it is called) has enrolled more than 470 scholars from many disciplines working at over 140 colleges and universities. Many members participate in issue-oriented groups to address major national challenges—ranging from voting rights and the effects of mass incarceration, to health reform implementation, and to women’s roles in politics and government. SSN also supports nineteen regional chapters operating autonomously in states and metropolitan areas from Maine to Hawaii and Minnesota to Texas. Each member presents research findings in vividly written two-page briefs. In turn, SSN staffers and volunteer leaders link members and their research to journalists and bloggers, to policymakers and their staffs, and to citizens associations and advocacy groups concerned with public issues. The Network as a whole is not aligned with any ideology, political party, or candidate. Members espouse varied views and make individual choices about civic engagement, yet they share a belief that scholars should reach beyond the ivory tower and draw from academic research to improve public policy and enhance democracy.

“Professors, We Need You!” declared a *New York Times* column published on Sunday, February 16, 2014 by opinion writer Nicholas Kristof—a jeremiad that launched the latest round of soul-searching about why the varied scholarship done by some 1.5 million professors working at US colleges and universities is mostly absent from public discussions and policy debates. “Some of the smartest thinkers on problems at home and around the world are university scholars,” Kristof observed, “but most of them just don’t matter in today’s great debates.”<sup>1</sup> After briefly acknowledging American anti-intellectualism, Kristof blamed academics themselves. University researchers and thinkers have “marginalized themselves,” he wrote, by creating a “culture of exclusivity” that “glorifies arcane unintelligibility while disdaining impact and audience.” In turn, academic disdain for public involvement is transmitted “to the next generation through the publish-or-perish tenure process.”

Kristof’s piece evoked an “amen” chorus, not only from media pundits but also from many university researchers who know that it is past time for us to wake up and reach out. With the spread of loud movements denouncing science and questioning the value of all scholarly research, how can university people continue to sit on the sidelines or talk only to each other? It is hardly incidental that OpEd

workshops for academics are attracting new interest, that university administrators are urging their charges to do more public outreach, that discussions of what scholars can do to reach policymakers are popping up during professional meetings. Universities are also hosting discussions such as the one convened in April 2014 at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University to ponder “how to make the expertise of those who study the world accessible to those who shape it.”<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, Kristof should realize that many academics are already working to reinvent widespread public intellectual engagement for our time. As often happens in an era of rapid change, the full-throated critique arrived a tad late, because ivory tower walls are already being breached from within by new waves of publicly-engaged scholars. Most US professors may still speak private languages within self-enclosed sub-disciplinary worlds, but many individual scholars and organized academic groups have devised creative new ways to engage with policymakers and the public, communicating in plain English with striking graphics, doing in short exactly what Kristof says needs to be done.

Digital modes of communication have enabled many efforts. From economist Brad DeLong of the University of California at Berkeley, to Middle East expert Juan Cole of the University of Michigan, and to legal scholar Richard Hasen at the University of California at Irvine, hundreds of professors maintain blogs to comment on public issues in everyday language. Discipline-based blogs, like *The Monkey Cage* in political science, post

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a steady stream of research snapshots, many of which are picked up in sustained news pieces and public discussions. Broader still is *The Society Pages*, a web publication and social media site featuring a wide array of constantly updated print offerings, visuals, and audio segments designed to make all areas of sociological research and neighboring areas accessible and fascinating to many audiences beyond as well as within the academy. University centers are also using electronic means to get research into the public realm, as exemplified by *Journalists' Resource* run by the Shorenstein Center at Harvard University.<sup>3</sup>

Then there is the Scholars Strategy Network that I help to lead, arguably the fastest-growing and most innovative new scholarly outreach undertaking of all. "SSN," as we call it for short, was launched several years ago to enable university-based researchers in all disciplines to more effectively engage with three sets of vital public interlocutors—policymakers and their staffs; journalists and bloggers; and citizens associations and public interest advocacy groups. Like all contemporary organizations, we have a nifty website (<http://www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org>) with hundreds of research briefs and news offerings plus constantly updated spotlights featuring individual scholars or assembling the latest research about major public issues from many members. Yet, from the start, SSN has operated person to person as well as in virtual cyberspace. Our strategy has been to meld longstanding American forms of federated civic voluntarism with the latest tools for reaching the media and the governmental and civic actors who shape public life and policymaking.

By now, SSN is approaching 500 scholar-members, ranging from graduate students to university professors in all fields and disciplines. Most of the energy and creativity SSN deploys comes from these members and from teams of leaders who direct nineteen regional chapters spread across the country plus working groups focused on issues such as voting rights, health reform implementation, women in government and politics, and the causes and consequences of mass incarceration. Our national steering committee includes me as director, along with Jacob Hacker of Yale University, Lawrence R. Jacobs of the University of Minnesota, Suzanne Mettler of Cornell University, and two philanthropic supporters, Robert Bowditch, a Boston businessman, and David desJardins, a California-based mathematician and founding Google alumnus.

The winter Sunday when Kristof's piece was published fell on Presidents Day Weekend, when academics are typically checked out. Yet, within hours, the national academic leaders of the Scholars Strategy Network e-mailed an "Open Letter" to Kristof, letting him know that we both applauded his message and have been very much on the job correcting the maladies he identifies.<sup>4</sup> Soon after, two leaders of one of SSN's most active regional chapters—Amy Fried of the University of Maine and

Luisa Deprez of the University of Southern Maine—posted their response at the news site *Talking Points Memo*.<sup>5</sup> Kristof tweeted back that he knows about SSN and appreciates what we are doing. "Can we clone you?" he wondered. The answer is yes, because from its 2011 launch in its current guise, the Scholars Strategy Network has been deliberately designed to be self-expanding through voluntary member initiatives. While SSN leaders and staff open doors and provide support, SSN scholars themselves do most of the recruiting of new members; and volunteer academic leaders are the ones who mount public endeavors suited to their own varied research interests, civic concerns, and the opportunities at hand for useful collaborations.

### SSN's Distinctive Strategy

I would like to report that SSN's vision and strategy burst forth full blown in one blinding moment of original inspiration, but that is just not true.<sup>6</sup> Initial attempts proved lacking in crucial respects, and the founders had to learn from mistakes before developing the present model.

By the time discussions about creating SSN got underway in 2009, the question of how to get academics more involved in public life had percolated for several years among a dozen or so scholars from several social science disciplines. For some time it had been clear—not just to those of us on the current SSN Steering Committee, but also to colleagues like Paul Pierson and Margaret Weir of the University of California at Berkeley, Frank Levy at MIT, and Katherine Swartz of the Harvard School of Public Health—that a lot of excellent scholars who work in universities and colleges around the country would like to be more fully engaged in public discussions, not just in discussions about what is or is not the right policy to deal with a problem such as job creation or environmental protection or immigration reform, but also in discussions about ways to gain democratic support for good policy ideas and ways to make government and democracy work better. Clearly, many in academia yearned to do more as citizens, but how?

In American academic life, there are long and rich traditions of civic engagement by university-based researchers and teachers. In the nineteenth century through the Progressive Era and the New Deal, scholars based in colleges and universities took it for granted that engagement with fellow citizens was part of their "calling." Think of the many professors who spoke at Chautauqua summer schools or addressed women's groups and reform associations, as the well as the academic experts who helped launch the Extension activities of the US Department of Agriculture, the early labor bureaus in the states, and the agencies of the federal government formed to promote social welfare, regulate the economy, and plan modern US foreign policies. In recent decades, however, the bridges and highways connecting universities

to public life have decayed almost as much as their physical counterparts across the land.

Washington, DC, has evolved into its own self-enclosed world populated with lobbyists and employees of specialized think tanks and advocacy groups, all focused on very specific areas of policy and speaking in insider languages full of technical details and acronyms incomprehensible to the uninitiated. Although researchers who work for think tanks are certainly involved in parts of this DC world, university people around the country often are not, unless they are drawn into special projects or take leaves to work for one president or another. What is more, a lot of important public work gets done in the states—and democratic public opinion is shaped by regional media and in citizens' groups and social movements. Some university people are very involved in those discussions and movements, but many who could be are not.

Washington, DC, and state capitals are not the only issue, however, because US academia has also turned inward. The huge growth of the US university sector since World War II has had some self-defeating accompaniments. Knowledge has accumulated as never before, but US academic life became hyper-specialized, with each professional group speaking its own insider language. Mountains of good research get published in specialized books or academic articles, but most of the relevant findings and ideas never get translated into policymaking or general public discussions.

From the start, those of us who launched SSN aimed to push back against key features of this current institutional situation. We wanted to engage the values, research, and voluntary creative energy of full-time university employees, not set up an additional staff-run think tank-type operation; and we were determined to cast a very wide net to include scholars from many disciplines and specialties, people at all stages of academic careers working in many types of colleges and universities. In addition to addressing journalists and policymakers, we also knew it would be important to reach out directly to citizen associations, like the League of Women Voters. And we likewise understood from the start the value of organizing chapters in various states and regions, not just setting up a website and central office. My research on the history of US citizen engagement underscores that social movements and voluntary associations have always had the greatest impact when they can operate at several levels at once, coordinating across the local, state, and national levels.<sup>7</sup> Drawing inspiration from America's civic past, we aimed to make SSN a federation as well as a nationwide individual membership association.

But the truth is we did not, at first, know exactly what to do to build a new kind of scholarly network like this. When people launch new organizations they often fall back on familiar routines, and so it was with SSN in its

first incarnation between 2009 and 2011. We urged sets of regional leaders to set up regularly-meeting groups of university scholars who wanted to engage public issues. That happened in several locations, but after a few bull sessions over refreshments, what were individual members and chapters supposed to do? Meanwhile, at the national level, SSN started out by paying handfuls of scholars to write 5000-word pieces that could be featured at public forums.<sup>8</sup> The first projects focused on the politics of taxation and new strategies for economic growth—worthy topics—but each cost a lot, took a long time to organize, and involved only a few of our members. Follow-up was not clear, and the forums could turn out to be poorly timed (as happened when much of the potential audience for our first Washington, DC, event on taxes was preempted by a White House forum on health care scheduled for the same day by President Obama!).

By 2011, many of us involved in launching SSN realized we needed a new organizational model—in which every member would have things to do, and in which carefully husbanded resources would be devoted to outreach and deployed by widely dispersed chapters and issue groups. The current incarnation of SSN was born in the early fall of 2011 and that academic year was spent recruiting more than one hundred new members, each one of whom wrote at least one two-page brief conveying important research results and ideas in everyday language. Writing such briefs was an important contribution that every single member could make, an act that expressed something basic to SSN: the desire to share academic work with fellow citizens.

With the aid of one full-time staff member, the Cambridge, Massachusetts, national office of SSN also spent that first year working with a young and hungry website development firm, Blue Coda, to create a website that would allow every one of our members and briefs to be instantly accessed by public audiences—and also enable national and regional SSN leaders to feature members' public projects, media contributions, and new research in a constantly updated set of postings. Blue Coda later won a prize from Interactive Media Awards for creating the best new politics website reviewed for the 2012 competition. By the early summer of 2012, the Scholars Strategy Network was ready to launch this national website and ramp up efforts to deploy the contributions of more than 100 inaugural members and founding chapters organized in Boston, New Haven, Maine, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Evanston, Berkeley, the Southwest (New Mexico) and the Northwest (Seattle). In the more than two years since then, SSN has grown rapidly and enabled members to have a real national and regional impact in various creative ways.

## How SSN Works

The best way to understand SSN is to see how the current model overcomes or works around obstacles that

have bedeviled past and alternative efforts to get university academics involved in public life. SSN lets university-based scholars leverage their work without diverting from it. By avoiding partisanship, ideological orthodoxy, and over-specialization, the organization gains flexibility to seize a changing mix of multiple opportunities for civic engagement. And by casting a wide net and supporting all members at all ranks, we can spread skills for public engagement and empower diverse groups of scholars, not just tout the usual isolated superstars or policy entrepreneurs.

Let's start with the most basic advantage: ***University-based scholars have to take active steps to join SSN but they need not depart in any time-consuming way from pursuing specialized academic research and publications.*** Instead of asking members to divert energies from specialized academic work, we help them build on work they are already doing to reach broader audiences. Young scholars need not worry that they are being pulled away from publishing to get tenure, and established academics can just add one more new way to get the word out about their work. SSN mobilizes meaningful commitment, but not in competition with the day jobs of our university members.

The key to making SSN an add-on rather than a substitute for specialized scholarly activity is our core product, the two-page brief written in vivid, everyday English—an adaptable mode of communication SSN founders “discovered” during our reorganization. Each and every scholar who joins SSN has to do more than ask to be put on a mailing list, because research shows that when people pay nothing to join a group, it means little to them. No matter how senior or famous, each new member has to fill out an SSN Member Profile that features his or her civic commitments and prior media contributions, if any, and briefly describes up to six books, articles, or reports that have public relevance. In addition, he or she has to draft an inaugural two-page brief and work with us to edit it into plain, everyday English, with no insider jargon, no overly technical terms, and no acronyms.

Habits of procrastination being what they are in academia, sometimes it takes a would-be member many months to get around to doing these simple tasks. We just wait and keep asking until it gets done. To prepare a draft brief, we urge a member to think of how she or he would explain the research or topic to a neighbor or an aunt at Thanksgiving dinner, and we edit very actively to help members learn to express complex findings and methods in everyday language. Members' first contributions are usually “SSN Key Findings” briefs that sum up main points from an underlying article, book, report, or conference paper. But some are “SSN Basic Facts” briefs that pull together what scholars know about an important topic or “SSN Civic Engagement” briefs that present a case study of a social movement or public activity or explain the

accomplishments of an important civic leader. Briefs can be either sole-authored or co-authored, and by now SSN has a remarkable library of nearly 500 of them across many fields of scholarship. We post PDFs of them online for all kinds of future uses, and briefs can be updated when appropriate and re-issued with the new date.

***Member-to-member recruitment and decentralized chapters are further advantages built into SSN's model.*** Kristof's question, “can we clone you?” reveals the importance of SSN's recruitment strategy. Voluntary organizations grow best not by advertising or sending out mass mailings, but by activating social networks and urging each participant to bring additional participants on board. That is what SSN encourages, and it is why we are growing regularly at a fast clip, always spreading into new niches of academia. Each member who joins SSN becomes, in turn, an organizer who reaches out to colleagues near and far and urges them to join too.

Voluntary groups also flourish by spreading opportunities for leadership, initiative, and creativity—and a classic US way to do that is by having a national organization provide a bit of support and inspiration for the organization of subnational chapters and other internal groups. SSN has issue-focused working groups through which voluntarily formed sets of members address major public issues such as voting rights and the effects of mass incarceration. Less conventionally, SSN also has subnational chapters called regional networks. Of course, many academics join SSN simply as individual members, either because they prefer to operate alone or because they are located in regions or universities with as yet no other SSN members. However, as soon as a cluster of members appears in a particular state or a metropolitan area with various universities and colleges, we look for sets of organizers who will put together a regional network. Nineteen of these networks have formed so far, and we want many more. Each regional network gets a small budget and has a chance to organize public events and connect to state policymakers, media, and citizens groups in its own way. Some regional networks focus on themes in a given year—for example the Southwest SSN network chose health reform over the past year, and Atlanta chose voting rights. But most chapters pursue several projects each year, and all have the opportunity to figure out what makes sense in their setting. Younger academics often take part in regional network leadership teams.

***Next, consider the civic motivations SSN is able to tap into. We don't pay people to join and only occasionally offer very modest honoraria for extra contributions. Yet even though SSN is a value-oriented voluntary association, it is also strictly non-partisan and not aligned with particular candidates or political parties.*** There is no SSN political orthodoxy—blessedly, no need to figure out political or policy positions hundreds of academics can agree upon. Yet no one is likely to join out of purely selfish

or pecuniary motives. Every member cares about the classic progressive value of civic engagement—a core American value well-expressed a hundred years ago by people such as Jane Addams of Hull House and the University of Chicago and pioneering health reformer Isaac Max Rubinow of Columbia University, who argued that it is part of a scholar's responsibility to address public issues and participate in democratic public life. Each individual SSN member decides for him- or herself what such public engagement means in practice, and each takes individual responsibility for signed writings and choices about taking part in specific civic or political activities.

SSN as an organization is proud of each member's engagement—and we don't try to downplay it, for example, if a member wants to write an OpEd supporting a candidate's position or advocate for a particular policy reform. But SSN as a whole is not formally allied with any other organization. We offer opportunities for many different kinds of civic engagement, and members can pick and choose. We are open to mutually-useful cooperation with many organizations within and beyond the university—the more the merrier—and we weave connections between our members and willing public partners regardless of political persuasions.

***Deliberate avoidance of issue specialization is another SSN strategy that generates many pay-offs.*** Unlike many think tanks and advocacy organizations that also seek to inject research into public debates, SSN deliberately casts a very wide net, recruiting scholars who work on everything from taxes, public budgets, and health care to immigration, women's issues, climate science, and studies of US foreign policy and other cultures and polities. Crucially, we also encourage members to communicate findings from research about public opinion, social movements, and civic life, as well as about particular policy challenges. Our members produce and communicate research findings about government operations and the democratic political process, not just about ideal policies in the abstract; and people are encouraged to write and speak about the ways in which politics shapes policy possibilities.

There is definitely a method to SSN's eclecticism. The idea is to be ready with ideas, findings, and people no matter what pops up on the public agenda. We never know in advance all that will come up, and SSN almost always has good people with intelligent things to say and briefs that say those things in understandable ways (or, if not, some of our members know colleagues we can quickly recruit.) For example, when the Aurora, Colorado, shootings happened, we had two members, Kristin Goss and Philip Cook, both at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, who have done compelling work on gun violence and gun control issues and movements, so we could feature their work and their media contributions.

When the Supreme Court took up affirmative action and, later, voting rights, we had leading experts in both of those areas—for the former, John Skrentny of the University of California at San Diego, and for the latter Richard Valeyly of Swarthmore College, Gary May of the University of Delaware, and Richard Hasen of the University of California at Irvine—and we were ready to connect them to journalists and help them publish commentaries. We regularly promote the work of our many members who work on tax and budget issues—a big deal during the 2012 election season and again whenever Congress devolves into fiscal standoffs. Finally, when Venezuelan politics came to the forefront of the news in the first elections after the death of Hugo Chavez, SSN was ready to promote the work of Jennifer McCoy of Georgia State University and the Carter Center in Atlanta.

Our big-tent approach also lets us build attention for topics not currently in the news and enables us to feature sets of scholars and combinations of research briefs that include historical and philosophical perspectives. A typical SSN outreach effort involves creating a website “spotlight” or a working group or a joint project to tackle some set of issues, drawing upon members and work from various disciplines and specialties. Such combinations make our media efforts and outreach to legislators and civic groups much more compelling. In our contributions to immigration reform debates, for example, we marry briefs and scholars presenting demographic trends and political science models of Congressional votes with others offering historical overviews and insights from ethnographic and interview studies. Every angle of analysis is available to journalists, advocates, and staffers in Congressional offices. American academia in our era is highly specialized, which has obvious payoffs. But scholars also need flexible ways to marshal and synthesize findings and ideas from various specialists—and we need to be able to do that much more quickly and flexibly than by planning an interdisciplinary conference leading to an edited book published three years later. By then, nobody in the fast-moving real world may care.

The huge range of contributions SSN has inspired so far is clearly visible in our remarkable list of scholar members and our growing directory of briefs classified into eight major areas, each further broken down into subtopics. Profiles and briefs are right there on the website at <http://www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org>, which is set up to make it easy for everyone to search our offerings, our people, and our briefs. Our eight major areas are: The Economy and Public Budgets; Economic Security; Health Care; American Democracy; Society and Social Issues; Education; Environment and Energy; and America and the World, and our subtopics keep proliferating as we welcome more hard scientists, climate specialists, foreign area specialists, historians, and even literature scholars to our ranks.

In sum, SSN is not like a think tank or specialized research institute at all. We are eclectic across policy areas and areas of social and political relevance. We include moral theorists and historians as well as the most hard-nosed economists, medical researchers, and statistical analysts; and we are happy to have scholars who address enduring concerns and matters entirely in the past. At least ninety percent of SSN members are always university and college based; we also include a few PhDs from research institutes, but only those who regularly collaborate with university scholars. Think tanks sometimes claim to engage university-based researchers, but in practice they stick to working through their own staff experts. SSN is a very different animal, not a bureaucracy with employees, but a network that leverages the ongoing work and civic commitment of excellent people already employed in colleges and universities.

### Achieving Sustained Public Impact

SSN grows its membership and adds chapters and working groups not just for the sake of getting bigger, but in order to help ever more university scholars influence public discussions and policymaking. We are constantly experimenting with how to do this more effectively, yet we have already achieved important successes in working with journalists, policymakers, and civic and advocacy groups. Again, our distinctive organizational model—combining a compact central staff and leadership with widespread members and many chapters and issue groups—turns out to have many advantages.

A lot of what SSN people do is both conceived and carried through by volunteer scholars. Their ideas, energy, and network connections have been our central resources from the get-go and that is never going to change. Nevertheless, a little bit of staff effort well deployed, can also help. The communications hub for members is run by Elizabeth Ghedi-Ehrlich, SSN's Director of Member Relations; and efforts to build relationships with policy actors and groups have taken a big leap forward since the arrival in the spring of 2013 of two new professional staff members: Avi Green, who serves as Director of Civic Outreach and Development, and Linda Naval, who serves as Director of Public Policy and Legislative Affairs and also as Deputy Director of SSN. Green was formerly the head of MassVote and is an expert on voting rights issues, and Naval formerly worked on the staff of Congressman Chris Murphy of Connecticut, now elected to the Senate. Both Green and Naval have become highly skilled at figuring out how to bring scholars and their research into mutually-beneficial dialogue with civic and advocacy groups as well as with public policymakers and staffers. They have prepared tip sheets and run training sessions to help members build such relationships. Several examples show the variety of direct ties they have fostered:

- During debates on immigration reform during the summer of 2013, Naval connected many SSN members doing scholarship on immigrants or immigration policy and politics to relevant Congressional offices. She arranged conference calls and some face-to-face meetings, and helped a set of SSN members based in San Diego prepare a memo comparing the immigration bill that passed the Senate with various fragmentary House bills. Readers on both sides of the aisle found that useful. Naval and Green also helped members publish OpEds related to public and legislative debates on immigration.
- Green has helped SSN members working on the future of the US labor movement share briefs and ideas for reforming unions and other labor organizations with leaders of the AFL—CIO and the Service Employees International Union.
- Naval has arranged for members of SSN's large working group on criminal justice to brief members of Congress involved in efforts by a House subcommittee and the Congressional Black Caucus to devise legislative reforms to address social problems associated with mass incarceration.
- In various states where voting-rule changes have been debated, Green has helped members of SSN's voting-rights working group to publish timely OpEds and to inform legislative committees and the League of Women Voters about the latest research on the impact of various election and registration procedures.

Beyond such efforts facilitated from SSN's national office, many regional chapters have done very successful relationship-building on their own. A few of many possible examples illustrate such undertakings. The Research Triangle (North Carolina) network engaged members of Congress in discussions about campaign finance legislation the solons were about to introduce. The Bay Area network in California orchestrated a public panel involving many area environmental groups; and both the Northwest chapter in Seattle and the Boston area chapter convened discussions among advocates, funders, and scholarly experts interested in better understanding the politics of global warming in the United States.<sup>9</sup> The Oklahoma SSN chapter sponsored discussions of urban policy in Norman. And in 2013, the Southwest SSN network played a central role in persuading New Mexico Governor Susana Martinez to accept the Medicaid expansion under the Affordable Care Act for her impoverished state; and this chapter has since worked with local nonprofit organizations and conducted briefings to help members of the New Mexico legislature learn about the challenges of implementing Affordable Care reforms in their state and improving physical and behavioral health care delivery to remote rural Native American and Hispanic communities.

Lastly, we come to SSN's multifaceted efforts to expand scholarly contributions through the news media. For reporters and editors, our member profiles and briefs serve as wonderful entry cards to many areas of scholarship. In the words of Michael Tomasky, who has a regular column at *The Daily Beast*, "if you are interested in substance on virtually any topic under the political sun by America's leading academics, you should be visiting SSN regularly."<sup>10</sup> Taking his own advice, Tomasky has done columns featuring the research of SSN members shortly after he read their briefs. On September 24, 2013, for example, Tomasky wrote about "How Legislators View Their Constituents," drawing on striking research findings summarized in a just-issued Key Findings brief by two young political scientists, David Broockman and Christopher Skovron.<sup>11</sup> Months later, on February 26, 2014, Tomasky's column again drew from newly-posted briefs—by Ling Zhu and Markie McBrayer at the University of Houston and by Jessica Sharac, Peter Shin, and Sara Rosenbaum at George Washington University—to highlight the consequences of the refusal of Texas authorities to expand Medicaid and fully implement other parts of the Affordable Care health reform law.<sup>12</sup>

Other journalists have also discovered SSN. To find academic experts who can be consulted and quoted for news stories of all sorts, many journalists, editors, and producers now regularly visit our website—and subscribe to our feeds disseminating new briefs and spotlights. Our Cambridge office gets regular calls asking for suggestions of scholars to contact. From time to time, media outlets simply link directly to one of our briefs—as the editorial staff of the *New York Times* did when it called for restoring voting rights to convicted felons who have served their sentences and included a live link to an SSN brief by Christopher Uggen of the University of Minnesota summarizing his research showing that majorities of the American public favor such reforms in most instances.<sup>13</sup>

Not content just to wait for journalists to come to us, SSN has also developed ongoing partnerships with various media outlets that allow many of our briefs to be reposted and more widely disseminated. Various websites do this from time to time, including *Daily Kos* and *Arguments* (the blog of *Democracy* magazine). Very frequently, *Journalists' Resource* at the Harvard Shorenstein Center for Media and Journalism selects new and archived SSN briefs to send to the inboxes of 10,000 working journalists. And *The Society Pages* has a front-page section that features regularly rotated SSN briefs.

Moving beyond the briefs as such, SSN staffers are adept at helping several members each week turn their briefs or other scholarly work into OpEd drafts, which are then offered for publication through SSN's ties to national outlets such as the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *Talking Points Memo*, and *CNN*, as well as to major regional newspapers like the

*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, the *Raleigh News Observer*, the *Detroit Free Press*, and the *Houston Chronicle*. By now, SSN has built up a reputation for offering smart pieces all ready to go in readable English, so editors regularly consider our submissions. Not all are accepted, but we can usually find a placement—and we keep at it until we do.

Working on their own, SSN regional chapters have forged beneficial sustained media relationships. The Minneapolis-St. Paul chapter regularly hosts forums that are broadcast by Minnesota Public Radio. The Maine SSN network has a branded slot in each Wednesday's edition of the *Bangor Daily News* (one of the two leading papers in the state); that slot is rotated among Maine members, so each of them gets a recurrent chance to write on a topic drawn from his or her research or areas of civic interest. The Hawaii SSN network has a relationship with *Civil Beat* in Honolulu. And during 2013–2014 the Atlanta chapter negotiated another kind of creative media partnership. In sync with other public activities mounted by the chapter, members published a series of OpEds grounded in voting rights research in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.

SSN is currently developing bolder and more comprehensive media strategies. We are creating and disseminating short videos to allow members to communicate in that growing format and to let television producers see people who would be good recruits for their programming. Building new expertise to help members do compelling charts and graphics is also very much on our agenda. Furthermore, SSN will soon go beyond offering media outlets one-off OpEds and research reports to proposing entire packages of briefs or sets of authors able to provide a series of related media contributions in key thematic areas—such as the workings of Congress, the impact of women in government, the effects of mass incarceration, school reform debates, the social and political consequences of rising income inequality, and ongoing studies about the challenges of implementing health reform in the fifty states as well as nationally. In these areas and many others, SSN has a critical mass of members doing cutting-edge work; and we have chartered national working groups through which members cooperate to address challenges over a one to two year period. There is no reason why we should not become more proactive in enabling groups of our scholars, not just single members, to project their findings and voices into public discussions.

The US media landscape is fragmented and competitive, creating new risks and opportunities for academics. "Explainer journalism" is a growing trend, with more and more outlets competing to see who can dig research nuggets out of academic journal articles and working papers to repackage for the educated public, and quite a few outlets are also looking for academics to write regular

offerings. SSNers and other academics benefit from such growing interest and competition—consider, for example, the April 2014 firestorm of blog and news features about the work of Princeton’s Martin Gilens and Northwestern University’s Ben Page on the tilt of US policymaking toward the preferences of the very wealthiest citizens (work published in this issue of *Perspectives on Politics*). But not all academic researchers who have important things to say will be able to ride such blogosphere boomlets. And except for those who happen to be running their own blogs in a time-consuming daily grind, scholars are currently overly dependent on journalists to find and present their work. Even when journalists notice, they may simply use data or ideas for their own purposes, with at most a brief reference or footnote acknowledging the academics who did the work.

During the February 2014 debates about Kristof’s jeremiad, one leading journalist, Ezra Klein, said with refreshing honesty that he is glad academics have not been very good at explaining their own research to the public, because that leaves an open market niche for “explainer journalists” like him to fill. If academics could do it themselves, Klein acknowledged, a lot of journalistic profits and web “hits” would not be there for the taking. Formerly the head of the Washington Post’s *Wonkblog*, Klein is now building his own explainer site at Vox Media. Along with competitors like the original *Wonkblog* and David Leonhardt’s *The Upshot* at the *New York Times*, Klein’s new site will continue to be an excellent place for academic research to be conveyed to a wide audience. SSN regularly sends materials to all such sites. But journalistic blog entries are much more ephemeral than SSN briefs, and current explainer sites like Klein’s tend to ignore scholarship that is not highly quantitative and produced by either economists or kindred political scientists.

SSN, in short, has good reason to do more than offer one-off contributions to journalists and news organizations. In months and years to come, we have the means and incentive to look for more proactive ways to project the contributions of a wider array of scholars, including groups of researchers, more directly and fully into public discussions.

The Scholars Strategy Network held its third annual leadership retreat in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on June 2 and 3, 2014. It was a moment to celebrate how far this remarkable new network has come in just a few action-packed years—and also a time to look ahead to so much more we can accomplish as we continue to experiment. The successful reinvention of public engagement by university people across the United States is a huge undertaking. We at SSN have hundreds more colleagues to recruit—and so many more scholarly research findings and ideas to share with policymakers and our fellow citizens. “Research to improve policy and enhance democracy” is our motto, and all of us involved in the

Scholars Strategy Network intend to keep doing all we can to fulfill that mission.

## Notes

- 1 Kristof 2014.
- 2 McMurtrie 2014.
- 3 New organized efforts are also underway, such as “Bridging the Gap” housed at American University and supported by a number of universities and foundations. This project aims to strengthen “the relationship between scholars of international relations and the broader foreign policy community” by convening meetings, assisting junior scholars, and conducting summer institutes. For an account of its 2013 International Summer Policy Institute, see McMurtrie 2013b.
- 4 Hacker et al. 2014.
- 5 Fried and Deprez 2014. See also Uggen 2014 for the response immediately penned by SSN member Christopher Uggen on the Editor’s page at *The Society Pages*. This web publication has an ongoing relationship with SSN by which it regularly re-posts many newly-issued SSN briefs.
- 6 This section draws on an interview with Theda Skocpol published in 2012 by the *Maine Policy Review*. See Fried and Deprez 2012.
- 7 See Skocpol 2003 and Skocpol, Ganz, and Munson 2000.
- 8 This first strategy was a variant of what the Tobin Project does. See McMurtrie 2013a on the Tobin approach, which uses generous grants to individual scholars and working groups that adapt academic research for policy purposes.
- 9 For an account of the Boston event, see Harvard Magazine staff 2013.
- 10 Tomasky 2013.
- 11 Ibid., Broockman and Skovron 2013.
- 12 Tomasky 2014, drawing from Zhu and McBryer 2014 and from Sharac, Shin, and Rosenbaum 2014.
- 13 *New York Times* editorial staff 2012, linking to Uggen 2012.

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