

# Popularizing RESEARCH



Engaging New Genres,  
Media, and Audiences

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# Introduction: Popularizing Research

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It was the first year of the new millennium. I was a young sociology PhD student at a research university in the US. Interested in popular culture and popular music in particular, I thought of utilizing a graduate social psychology seminar in which I was enrolled as an opportunity to do some research on personal identity, youth, and Top 40 pop music. I was an eager student—driven to find a secure academic post immediately after graduation. I knew I had to publish research even before my dissertation was defended. So I pitched the idea about my possible paper to my professor—a tenured and well-regarded social psychologist.

“Who cares? It’s just pop music, Phillip,” was her reaction. Studying popular music and popular culture wasn’t quite Sociological, she explained. To be sure, it was sociological in nature, but it wasn’t Sociological with a capital “S”—the “S” that rubber-stamps mainstream, institutionalized, respectable American Sociology. She hinted that if I wanted to practice the kind of Sociology that could get me a job, I had to toe the party line.

Digging a little bit deeper the attitude behind her answer—and the broader collective attitude for which it stood—I soon learned my lessons. First, forget the popular and the populace. Surely, as any good Sociologist, I should feel free to speak on behalf of the common (wo)man, but for the most part I should do so only paternalistically and demagogically, without doing anything about it. What they—the members of the populace—like is not what we—respectable academics—like. And what they are like is not what we are like.

Second, and following the first point, I shouldn’t bother communicating with laypeople about my research, as it wouldn’t get me an academic job. They watch reality TV, listen to bad music, digest dumbed-down knowledge provided by whatever journalists decide to feed them. We, on the other hand, produce intellectual material too precious to be sullied by easily digestible formulas, too complex to be broken down for easier appreciation by their unsophisticated palate.

The story ends years later with my leaving Sociology with a capital “S,” slamming the door on my way out, never to return. But that detail is much less interesting than what the story itself reveals: popular research is something that all academics should do at their own risk. So, before I go any further with my writing, I’ll need to issue a loud and clear warning: proceed at your own risk. Determine whether your higher-ups will appreciate your messing with the needs and the wants of the populace. Think carefully about it: will your thesis or dissertation committees dig it? Will your tenure mentors value it? Will your grant agencies care? How much time will it take? How much will it cost you? But hey, on the other hand, if you think that life without taking a little risk isn’t fun—and if you think that research without imagination is, well, not that much fun either—stick around. This should be a sweet ride.

## What This Book Is, and Who It’s for

In pitching my proposal to my acquisitions editor at Peter Lang, I loudly exclaimed that this book was meant for people who have had enough of spending months, if not years, to produce research that will be read in less than ten minutes by five distracted readers who will forget what they have read in less than three minutes. That was my raw message. I could have baked it up a bit more. I could have sold it to her by saying that this book was targeted to audiences interested in knowledge mobilization, or knowledge exchange, or knowledge transfer, or research outreach and dissemination best practices, and/or the various flavors of “public” disciplines such as public sociology, public anthropology, etc., but instead I decided to cut to the chase. I promised to deliver a book for the bored and disenfranchised, for those feeling alienated from the drudgery of academic writing and inauthentic about producing more of the same drivel, and for those willing to let their academic imagination play.

She wasn’t the only one to really get my idea. Earlier, I had gotten on as many listservs as I could and put out a call for proposals that read:

I am inviting chapter proposals for an edited book that will show and tell ways that scholars can make research more popular to larger lay, media, and other popular audiences. Much too often research in the social sciences and humanities suffers from an ivory-tower complex, the symptoms of which prevent wide audiences from fully enjoying the processes or appreciating the value and utility of research. As a result, research is often destined for and consumed by a small cadre of readers who have access to both the narrowly accessible media in which research is published, and the difficult lexicon that characterizes academic writing. As new, experimental and blurred genres of research emerge, as well as new distribution media, new academic imperatives, and new ideas and wills, the need to popularize academic research grows. How to popularize research is, however, neither always clear nor easy. Students and scholars often lack a comprehensive vision of the contemporary possibilities available and the procedures involved. The goal of this book is to provide students and scholars with a broad and thorough overview and serve as a companion for any research method course or as a handy reference for career academics. Since the goal is to make research popular, the means themselves should abide by that principle. Therefore, I am not interested in editing a dry, tedious, abstract book. I am seeking witty, fun, funny, enthusiastic, thrilling, suspenseful, dramatic, performative, artistic, documentary, provocative, innovative, sensual, sexy, genre-blurring, multi-modal, multimedia, charismatic, experimental, funky, cool research material. In other words, I am seeking to collect *examples and reflections* of ways in which research in the social sciences and humanities can be more like *popular* culture.

A little less than a month later, I had received over 150 ideas. Two months later, I had twice as many new messages in my inbox, accompanied by at least 50 emails that were not sent to propose anything to me, but simply congratulate me on the idea. I realized that across the disciplines and across the world, many students and scholars had encountered noxious attitudes of people like my social psychology professor. The idea for this book struck a chord with them, and the process of making research more popular—a decade after my encounter with navel-gazing academia in that graduate seminar—was now fully under way for a lot of people.

So what exactly is this book now, after it's all said and done? A tempting sound bite such as "an illustrated guide to making research public" might characterize it in part, but there is more to it than that. The idea behind this project is to *go beyond the book* as medium of academic knowledge dissemination, and to exploit the potential of the web to facilitate access to new media, new research genres, and therefore new audiences that the book alone could not reach. As a result, this book comes with a website, available at <http://www.popularizingresearch.net>. The website and the book together deliver a multimodal message about popularizing research, which seems truly innovative to me, for a few reasons.

First, books on *how* to make research more accessible are now legion. And so are books on *why* we should reach out to broader publics. Yet neither of these bodies of useful knowledge are particularly adept or transparent about actually doing it—that is, about showing the outcomes of popularized research.

Second, the web is vastly underused by academic book authors and editors, and academic journals as well. While every peer-reviewed journal these days has a website, and every other introductory textbook does too, the multimodal potential of the web is not thoroughly exploited. Thus, we get websites that mirror text-based content (e.g., peer-reviewed journal websites) and companion websites that mostly mirror some of the most unimaginative material of classroom teaching (e.g., quizzes and text-based PowerPoint lectures, with a few hyperlinks thrown in for good flavor).

Third, despite the potential of the internet to reach more people than the academic book, the organizational state of internet-based popularized research is a sorry mess. Whereas freely accessible broad internet search engines such as Google Scholar and more specialized and restricted academic search engines such as ProQuest provide easy and fast access to overwhelming amounts and types of research, no search engine or directory for non-text-based academic research is available. As a result, searching for examples of popularized research is time-consuming and frustrating, if not downright futile. Try this for yourself on Google, YouTube, or Vimeo.

For all of these reasons and others I don't have the space to enumerate here, combining a book with a web-based directory of popularized research seemed like a good and terribly simple idea. This also seemed appealing to me because this strategy allows me and all the other contributors not only to *tell* the audiences of this book and website how this kind of research is done and why, but also to *show* them what the fuss is all about.

In sum, this book/website package is meant for people like you: students, academics, and professional researchers who are keen on expanding the audiences of their research, and who are tired of producing inaccessible writing distributed through inaccessible media to largely invisible audiences. As I like to tell my communication students, a decade after that miserable exchange with my social psychology professor, it is not sufficient to be familiar with the cultures and the languages of the people we study and to investigate the multiple media through which cultures are reproduced. Rather, what we need to do is find ways to directly employ the cultures and languages of the people we study and communicate with them through the very

same multiple media, in order to learn from them and in order to educate and produce new public cultures. If you find this to be a possible, albeit admittedly partial, solution against academic elitism and irrelevance, then this book and website are for you.

## Kindred Spirits

The move toward public research is not new, fortunately. Several pioneers in the social sciences and humanities have distinguished themselves throughout the last century for their popularization work. In some disciplines, these pioneers are also recognized as the very founding fathers and mothers of their discipline. For example the ethnographic writings (combined with political activities) of anthropologists Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Claude Levi-Strauss, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Franz Boas managed to reach large numbers of citizens throughout the early 20th century, becoming classics not only in their own field, but also of our civilization as a whole. As McClancy (1996) rightly remarks, their success proves that:

the space between the academic and the popular is not a one-way street but an arena of voices where one may inspire the others. As the example of Ruth Benedict's *Chrysanthemum and the Sword* shows, that space is potentially one of productive dialogue rather than patronizing monologue. Popular anthropology need not be a downmarket derivative of "the real stuff." It is not a cheapened version of a high-quality product which has been allowed to "trickle down" (a patronizing metaphor of treacherous hierarchy). It is an integral, contributory part of the discipline, broadly conceived. (p. 4)

Notwithstanding these illustrious kindred spirits, for the better part of the last century, academia as a whole seemed mostly to further cave in on itself. Anthropological writing, for example, became inaccessible because of its technical, theoretical nature (McClancy, 1996). The same happened in sociology (Burawoy, 2005), which had earlier enjoyed a good measure of popularity through writings of authors such as William H. Whyte (1956) and David Riesman (1950). Similar trends unfolded in other disciplines, for a variety of reasons.

Chief among these reasons might be a widely shared affective disposition among many academics: the fear of being popular. Some might view this as the outcome of a bad experience with the media—being misquoted, for example, or seeing one's work dumbed down by a journalist in need of condensing a long and complex argument into a few words. Others might view it as a typical disposition of all those individuals who dedicate years of their life, especially in their young formative years, to the lone pursuit of intellectual matters. After all, who among advanced students has not once looked down in disdain from the high floors of the university library at the masses of raucous students amusing themselves with the moot victories of their sports team or otherwise busying themselves with equally seemingly trivial and crass pleasures typical of the "common man"?

Some might even argue that these dispositions are at the very ideological core of cut-throat academic politics, and that the practices of gate-keeping committees—whether in charge of awarding degrees, tenure, or publication—are in fact nothing but the reproduction of an exclusive and elitist ego-defending attitude disdained with the value of popularity. Whatever the case, what is obvious is that graduation and career prospects in academia have long mostly hinged upon students and aspiring professors preaching to the choir, rather than sully their hands with the needs and the wants of the populace. What graduate student hasn't been reminded that to make tenure, one must write research and theory monographs instead of textbooks, and peer-reviewed journal articles instead of magazine and newspaper columns? As a

result, the scorn and stigma of “pop” psychology, “pop” political science, or “pop” this and that attached to those who dare aim their writings for the shelves of bookstore chains and newspaper kiosks echo through the hallways of the ivory tower, haunting and halting careers, and preventing authentic peer acceptance.

This ideology and shared affect has acted like a vicious cycle across the social sciences and humanities. When being a “generalist” becomes equated with being unsophisticated and superficial, it becomes logical for the social sciences and humanities to splinter. New disciplines such as communication studies and cultural studies and women studies are born from once common social theory. Old disciplines such as anthropology split asunder in cultural anthropology, archaeology, linguistic anthropology, and biological anthropology. Then, geopolitical and organizational divisions compound the effects. Thus we witness splits between social and cultural anthropology, social and cultural geography, the sociology of culture and cultural sociology—and so on. Soon enough then, book and journal publishers realize that their best marketing bet is not to aim for large audiences, but for narrow, specialized niches—an editorial practice that further Balkanizes scholarship and reinforces the idea that 1,000 audiences of 100 are easier to achieve than one of 100,000.

The corollary of all this is that it’s rather easy and common for any academic to feel irrelevant. And this is more than just a feeling. In an era of ever-deepening cuts to university budgets and constantly increasing political pressure on universities to contribute to a knowledge-based creative economy, researchers are beginning to deal with shifting political priorities. Whether universities are pushing academics to find commercial applications for their research or to popularize their teaching material and methods to appeal to new student markets, or simply to apply their research to concrete problem-solving and thus more directly benefit communities of stakeholders, the latest trends in academic politics are obvious: researchers must begin to climb down from the ivory tower, and they need to do so swiftly, even though they may not know how.

Such was the realization inherent in various turns toward the publicization and popularization of academic research that marked the beginning of the millennium. In sociology, for example, the turning point was undoubtedly Michael Burawoy’s enormously influential (and equally controversial) address to the American Sociological Association in 2004 (Burawoy, 2005). Burawoy had been noticing a growing disconnect between an American political culture swerving toward the right and a sociological culture becoming more and more leftist. Keen on seeing a growth in the impact of sociology on public discourse, Burawoy called upon his colleagues to reach out to American voters and the world. Sociology could achieve this aim by reverting to its traditionally public role and by better appreciating its new organic public function. His incitation is worth quoting at length.

Public sociology brings sociology into a conversation with publics, understood as people who are themselves involved in a conversation. It entails, therefore, a double conversation. Obvious candidates are W. E. DuBois (1903), *The Souls of Black Folks*, Gunnar Myrdal (1994), *An American Dilemma*, David Riesman (1950), *The Lonely Crowd*, and Robert Bellah et al. (1985), *Habits of the Heart*. What do all these books have in common? They are written by sociologists, they are read beyond the academy, and they become the vehicle of a public discussion about the nature of U.S. society—the nature of its values, the gap between its promise and reality, its malaise, its tendencies. In the same genre of what I call *traditional public sociology* we can locate sociologists who write in the opinion pages of our national newspapers where they comment on matter of public importance.... The traditional public sociologist instigates debates within or between publics, although he or she might not actually participate in them. There is however another type of public sociology—*organic public sociology* in which the soci-