Public Engagement in Political Science: Moving beyond Tweets, Blogs, & Media Interviews

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Abstract. When political scientists talk about and apply public engagement, acts like tweets, blogs and media interviews are often cited as key strategies to disseminate scholarly knowledge. While these approaches certainly represent one layer of engagement, there are many others political scientists are currently not tapping into. Scholars in other disciplines such as Indigenous Studies and Health, for example, often draw upon dissemination strategies that engage the stakeholders of their work more deeply. Such outputs can include community reports and newsletters, non-scholarly presentations, ongoing relationship building through regular communication, webinars and digital trainings as well as other education and outreach activities. The fact that many of these acts are not the norm in political science, raises questions about the impact of our work, value for money generated by universities and its scholars, and whether academics have a responsibility to communicate scholarly findings more broadly. As scholars, do we have an obligation to translate and disseminate the scholarly knowledge that is derived from our research? In this paper, we argue political scientists (and all social science scholars) have a duty to more widely translate and disseminate research results and ensure these findings find their way into the hands of key stakeholders. Depending on the discipline and research topic this could include governments, community members, NGOs and the private sector. We present a model for engagement that political scientists can follow to stretch the reach of their work, enhance value for money and put important knowledge into hands beyond ivory towers or social media.

Introduction

For many years public and societal advancement has been a key feature of the mission statements of universities (Furco, 2010; Furco and Goss, 2001). Yet, despite universities' emphasis on public engagement in institutional missions or strategic plans, public engagement initiatives have been mostly relegated to the margins until recently. This increase in the relevance and importance of public engagement is also occurring in the discipline of political science and the broader research community given the recent emphasis on knowledge mobilization and dissemination (Bennett et al., 2007). Part of this shift has been stimulated by the focus research funding agencies have given to public engagement, knowledge mobilization and broader impacts that deliver benefits to society beyond knowledge production (SSHRC, 2016; NSF, 2018). Another consideration is the proliferation of the internet and social media, which has opened up new spaces for engagement including informational tools such as blogs, websites and podcasts. New digital spaces have allowed scholars to engage in two-way communication with the public via online comments and questions, or remarks on Twitter, involving the public as opposed to merely informing them. In general, public engagement is becoming more fashionable and an increasing number of political scientists have leveraged digital tools to inform and involve public and policy communities and stakeholders. Use of blogs, for example, have been well-documented (Sides, 2011; Nyhan et al., 2015), while creation of podcasts[1] (Mollett et al., 2017) and other online forums (Gastil and Richards, 2017) has been called for but are yet being fully realized.

While the expansion of public engagement in political science is positive, for the most part this shift is characterized by an increase in the number and types of tools used as opposed to the depth or level of engagement. Typical strategies often focus on informing or engaging members of public or policy communities, but do not include broader engagement, stakeholder empowerment, or capacity building. We argue that the political science community primarily draws upon a repertoire of dissemination strategies that constrain the extent of public engagement and research impact (Sides, 2011). Scholars in other disciplines such as Indigenous Studies and Health, for example, are increasingly drawing upon dissemination strategies that engage the stakeholders of their work more thoroughly and which political scientists can learn from (Henry et al., 2016; Wang, 2003). Such outputs can include community reports, non-scholarly presentations, ongoing relationship building through regular communication, digital or in-person trainings as well as other education and outreach activities. The fact that many of these acts are not the norm in political science raises questions about the impact of our work, value for money generated by universities and its scholars, and whether we have a responsibility to communicate scholarly findings more broadly. As scholars, to what extent do we

[1] Use of podcasts by political scientists has been document in the context of university teaching (see Lawrence and Dion, 2010) but not regarding research translation and dissemination that we could find in scholarly databases.

have an obligation to translate and disseminate the scholarly knowledge that is derived from our research?

This paper was inspired by the authors' attendance of a workshop at the 2018 Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association entitled, "Public Engagement by Political Scientists" which focused on the benefits and challenges of public engagement and effective knowledge mobilization (CPSA, 2018). While listening to the panelists we were struck by the fact that the types and tools of engagement being framed as "effective public engagement" were focused on informing the public via media interviews and op-eds or engaging in online forums such as Twitter. While we acknowledge these tools as channels of broader scholarly dissemination, this paper argues that a majority of political scientists are tapping into the lower echelons of a spectrum of public engagement and that by leveraging alternative strategies to more deeply engage public and policy communities could significantly enhance research impact. Specifically, we maintain that political scientists (and all social science scholars) have a duty to more widely translate and disseminate research results to ensure these findings make their way into the hands of affected stakeholders and communities. This could include governments, community members, NGOs and the private sector. We present a model for engagement motivated by our own research that political scientists can follow to stretch the reach of their work, enhance value for money and put knowledge into hands beyond ivory towers, media, or social media.

Types of Engaged Research

In recent years, new research approaches have emerged in political science.[2] Some of these have long been present in other areas of academia, such as socially-engaged approaches to research whereby participants are not considered "research subjects" per se, but rather are actively involved in the research to varying degrees. Stanton defines engaged scholarship as "research that partners university scholarly resources with those in the public and private sectors to enrich knowledge, address and help solve critical social issues, and contribute to the public good" (2008: 20). In some cases this includes informing participants of research and research findings (e.g., community-engaged research), whereas in others, it means actively engaging them in shaping research design and outputs, (e.g., community-based participatory research).

Partnership or collaborative approaches to research are gaining prominence in political science. In an article for 50th anniversary issue of the *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, the authors of this paper argue for partnership research as a tool for knowledge promotion and as a means for making political scientists' work more

[2] The authors of this paper have contributed to a special issue (forthcoming) in Politics, Groups, and Identities that discusses the broad theme of 'socially engaged research in political science'. This is the first issue that we know of that explores the value of socially engaged approaches within our discipline.

relevant to society (Goodman et al., 2017: 202). Obviously, research of this nature can involve a lot of extra time and effort working with partners. In addition, engaged research often generates different types of outputs that are not in line with traditional academic standards and are often not valued as part of institutionalized faculty evaluations. Goodman and colleagues suggest:

> Research outputs should be useful to participant partners. The production of timely and concrete deliverables for non-academic partners is not only a possibility, but a requirement. These can include outreach events, policy position papers, open-access data, development of commercially viable products or services, or reports tailored to respond to partners' direct needs. In addition, partnerships can deliver skills enhancement, research training and networking opportunities. This can be especially important in projects involving marginalized and socially vulnerable communities (2017, 206).

Existing university structures, notably the tenure and promotion process, fundamentally discourage supporting engaged and partnership research, particularly among pre-tenured faculty. Academic incentives can work against researchers to the extent that university norms do little to drive and promote engaged scholarship and partnerships. This is problematic for the future of political science as broader university structures, research funding bodies, and society move in the direction of engaged and partnership research and outcomes (Gabel and Goodman, 2019).

The Historical Context of University and Political Science Engagement

Despite public and societal advancement being a key focus of higher education institutions (Furco, 2010), academics have traditionally disseminated scholarly knowledge through selective channels "guaranteed" to minimize impact (Sides, 2011: 271). Traditional venues for scholars, which have been given priority due to the nature of tenure and promotion, include peer-reviewed journals, books, scholarly conferences and other select publications in outlets that while not perhaps exclusively academic, are intended for specialized audiences such as policymakers or elites. The obvious challenge with these outlets is their limitations in reaching wider audiences due to issues with access stemming from institutional paywalls and the technical nature of some works, which may prevent findings from being translatable to the wider public. In addition, higher education generally has been criticized for not keeping pace with societal change and often addressing topics that are arcane and or have limited societal relevance (Albach et al., 2005). These issues speak to the culture of universities and what constitute scholarly productivity. This model has created structural boundaries that have minimized the wider impact of scholars and the knowledge they produce. In many ways, these structures have also dictated how academics have collected data. Traditional approaches have focused on scholarly independence with academics either collecting or purchasing their own data (King and Persily, 2018).

Research exploring the traditional approach universities have taken to serving broader society point out that initially it was very much focused on specific knowledge application which primarily served business, government or agriculture to support nation building and economic development (Ropert and Hirth, 2005). In this way, even when universities focused on providing knowledge to the 'public' it was primarily achieved through an expert model characterized by a one-way approach to dissemination where specialized knowledge was delivered to select groups as opposed to collaboratively engaging stakeholders (Weerts and Sandman, 2008). While the emphasis on more collaborative partnerships has risen in recent years, and many universities have or are transitioning to a two-way approach to engagement on campus (Weerts and Sandman, 2008), in the field of political science there remains little emphasis on 'public engagement'. In fact, a scholarly search for articles with the keywords 'political science' and 'public engagement' returns few contributions and most of these results focus on science and broader knowledge engagement and dissemination in scientific disciplines (Stilgoe et al., 2014). While we may be engaging with public and policy communities more often, we do not write about it much.

Those contributions that do come up discuss the fact that "academics are not encouraged to make their work accessible" and how we, as political scientists are trained not to explain our work to non-specialists (Thorson 2018: 674). In addition, academics are rarely willing to relinquish control of the research process and co-design or engage stakeholders/ non-academic research partners in the research design, methods and deliverables of studies (Goodman et al., 2017). While discussions of the field of political science point to silos and 'separate tables' in the discipline (Almond, 1988), we argue that the way political scientists think about engaging stakeholders in research and disseminating these findings to the broader 'public' remains siloed and influenced by the traditional approach to sharing scholarly knowledge.

As noted above, this is gradually changing as political science scholars embrace alternative strategies to engage stakeholders and leverage new channels to disseminate their results. A number of studies have relied on partnerships with organizations or governments, while others introduce new industry-academic models to mutually benefit scholars and the public (King and Persily, 2018). The extent to which these non-academic entities are *engaged* in the research design process and directly benefit from the outputs, however, is less clear.

In one recent study King, Scheer and White (2017) partnered with 48 media small to medium-sized media outlets to randomize news content on policy issues to evaluate how online discussion is affected. In another paper, King and Persily (2018) propose a novel partnership model to better connect scholars, internet technology firms and the public for research and access to data, even in environments that are highly politicized. The researchers established an organization called Social Science One, comprised of senior scholars who, acting as a trusted third party, oversee that

companies and the public are protected in the data sharing process, while scholars gain access to data they would not have had otherwise. The pilot partnership was formed between Social Science One and Facebook with support from the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) and 8 non-profit foundations. While the creation of this organization is groundbreaking, and a step toward breaking away from traditional academic models of data collection, it is unclear the benefit the industry partner receives from the collaboration, aside from knowing it is contributing to the creation of knowledge and social good, or how the results will be disseminated more widely to engage and benefit the public.

In a Canadian context there are a growing number of projects founded on partnerships outside of academia, many of which are funded by SSHRC partnership focused grants. One project entitled, Creating Digital Opportunity, connects academics, industry and government to better understand how to leverage opportunities in Canada's digital sectors to improve global competitiveness (Wolfe, 2018). This project involved active collaboration from project partners, including yearly conferences to disseminate results and gain feedback, advice on written work and presentations, co-publishing with partners (Spicer et al., 2019) and dissemination of findings through public reports (Wolfe, 2018). Another example is the First Nations Digital Democracy Project, which partners with industry, government, NGOs and Indigenous communities to understand the effects of digital technology on participation and governance in First Nations. This project employed a community-engaged approach that included partners collaboratively in the research design process and knowledge mobilization, ensuring there were targeted outputs created for partners such as community reports, community newsletter contributions, presentations throughout all stages of the research process, and community training and engagement in data collection (Gabel et al., 2016a; Gabel and Goodman, 2019).

Finally, in a Canadian context, there are organizations that connect industry partners with scholars and fund research (with a financial commitment from the partner) to produce knowledge that benefits both partner and researcher. Mitacs, a national organization that builds partnerships with industry, academics and the world to promote innovation is one example. Ontario Centres of Excellence is a provincially focused initiative that links scholars and businesses in research and commercializing innovation. While these organizations and the partnerships they create produce knowledge that has wider benefit, translating knowledge to promote broader social good is unclear.

Defining Public Engagement

The term "public engagement" is widely endorsed by universities and used by social science scholars, but has been treated rather poorly by political scientists (Goodman et al., 2017). Multiple literatures offer a range of definitions of public and civic engagement from social sciences and humanities to science (Varner, 2014). While in some disciplines it has an exact definition, in others it is used more organically.

Following our own community-engaged research with municipalities and Indigenous communities across Canada, we have chosen to define public engagement broadly, to encompass the many and varied ways scholars, and students engage with others outside of the academy. It is also important to note that who constitutes the "public" is also a matter of debate and discussion. Sociological research suggests that "the public" is actually a diverse collection of many publics, each with its own knowledge, values, beliefs, and worldviews (Maibach et al., 2009, Fischhoff, 2013).

Benefits and Challenges of Public Engagement

Public engagement in research has many potential benefits. It can advance public understanding of scholarly knowledge and influence policy and program change. Public engagement also highlights the importance of faculty research and the knowledge it generates, and justifies public spending on higher education and funding by federal granting agencies. In particular, SSHRC requires each grant to address its broader impacts by evaluating proposed knowledge mobilization plans. SSHRC also issues *Impact Awards* which are designed to recognize outstanding scholars by building on and sustaining Canada's research-based knowledge culture in all research areas of the social sciences and humanities including their research achievements, research training, knowledge mobilization, and outreach activities (SSHRC, 2019).

On a more personal level, public engagement also helps scholars feel that their work is valued and has relevance outside of the academy, giving them the motivation to advance their programs of research. Research Impact Canada (RIC) is a pan-Canadian network of 17 universities that document the impact of academic research for the public good in local and global communities. What is unique about RIC is that they move beyond traditional citation metrics as examples of impact and highlight the importance of other forms of impact which include collaboration, mentoring and dialogue. RIC (2019) is responsible for "sharing best practices, services and tools, and by demonstrating to relevant stakeholders and the public the positive impacts of mobilizing knowledge".

Most academics are not trained in public engagement (Varner, 2014). However, there does appear to be some movement toward training initiatives for students. For example, the *Public Scholars Initiative* at the University of British Columbia moves PhD students beyond both generic skills training and extracurricular experience, to an integrative approach to doctoral education that supports diverse forms of collaborative scholarship and new, innovative forms of outreach activities as components of the PhD qualification itself.

The number of print and web-based media outlets that publish pieces and articles by academics has also increased. While traditional venues like the *New York Times, National Post* or *the Globe and Mail* remain important, other publications such as *The Conversation* and *Policy Options* help faculty translate their research findings for wider audiences. These publications allow faculty members to use their

expertise to inform public debate. Ultimately, universities benefit from increased name recognition and prestige when faculty research becomes important in public debates as influential findings do matter to our institutions.

Joya Misra and Jennifer Lundquist (2014) argue that “writing op-eds and carrying out interviews with the news media about published research may eat into time writing journal articles. Rather than treating that as a zero-sum game, universities need to recognize and value both types of activities”. As the title of our paper suggests, we need to move beyond “tweets, blogs, and media interviews” to recognize the considerable time that collaborative or community-engaged research requires, the risks faculty members take in investing in relationships that may not result in traditional academic outputs (newsletters, community reports and presentations for example) or conform to predictable timelines, and the trade-offs for scholarly publications typically involved in engaged research. This is particularly important when it comes to tenure and promotion as our discipline prioritizes high-impact publishing. In particular, pre-tenured faculty and graduate students are encouraged to focus on publishing in top journals and avoid public engagement and other non-traditional outputs such as blogs (Harley et al., 2010). Public engagement cannot simply be an add-on to existing faculty responsibilities, but should be incorporated in ways that recognize the value and importance of these outreach activities.

A New Model of Public Engagement

Thinking about expanding our conception of public engagement as scholars we propose a model political scientists can draw upon to *engage* the public in the research process and outputs. It is important to emphasize that such engagement does not have to, nor should it, only occur post-research when findings are collected and translated. Rather, political scientists engagement with the broader public, stakeholders or policy communities can take place at multiple stages in the research process depending on the nature of the study and the openness of the scholar to “engage”. We repurpose the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum produced by the International Association for Public Participation to reflect the levels of engagement political science scholars can leverage to enhance public engagement, and the tools they can draw upon to achieve this, Figure 1.

The proposed model has four levels and is ever evolving. Levels include (1) Inform, (2) Involve, (3) Collaborate and (4) Empower. Each level encompasses different public engagement activities that lend themselves to distinct types of impact. The first level, Inform, is in line with traditional political science approaches to public engagement that typically have the goal of *informing* public and policy communities. This information transfer is one-way and does not not allow often allow for real-time engagement with the scholar, or substantive engagement at all. Information channels include conventional outlets such as op-eds, media interviews, open access publications, magazine or speciality journal contributions (e.g., outlets

targeted to specific audiences in industry or government); or newer digital mediums such as blogs, podcasts and websites. Examples of scholars who have used this approach but shown particular dedication to ensuring relevant stakeholder communities are informed include the University of Toronto's Peter Loewen serving as a columnist for the Ottawa Citizen, Sara Bannerman's (McMaster) Communications Governance Observatory podcast to inform the general public about more complex communications issues, and John Sides' (George Washington University) Monkey Cage blog, now part of the Washington Post, which originated with the goal of better informing the media and policymakers and raising public interest in research. While these cases reflect scholars who went above and beyond the traditional expected effort of political scientists to inform and serve the public, the primary intention was to inform and did not extend to broader engagement.

The second level, Involve, puts an emphasis on greater public engagement through online interactions and conversations. This level can include the use of digital tools such as social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Instagram), webinars where attendees can engage and ask questions and presentations or public talks that are not academic focused, but rather have the intention of translating and disseminating findings to wider, non-scholarly audiences. Scholars engaging with the public at this level are often going above and beyond the typically assumed engagement of political scientists, but the true engagement of the public via these mediums remains limited. Scholars active on Twitter such as Harvard's Gary King with 31,000 followers and the University of Waterloo's Emmett MacFarlane with 22,000 followers epitomize this category.

Third, we propose a level entitled, Collaborate, which involves stakeholders more deeply by including them more meaningfully in the research process or knowledge mobilization and dissemination aspects. This approach is categorized by two-way engagement whereby stakeholders have the opportunity to engage at a level beyond questions and are often more fully integrated into the research process. In many respects this level is well represented by political science scholars who undertake engaged research, although this approach is not popularly adopted in our discipline. Public engagement activities that differentiate this level can involve the inclusion of stakeholders in research outputs such as co-publishing or co-developed and created art exhibits or digital storytelling. In these instances, stakeholders are a meaningful actor in the production and dissemination of research as opposed to merely a subject of it.

An example of an active political science scholar practicing in this realm is York University's Ethel Tungohan, whose work employs a collaborative approach that engages community partners. For example, rather than seeing immigration and citizenship research as only encompassing analysis of political institutions, Tungohan asserts questions can be generated and analyzed from the bottom-up instead of merely top-down. She works directly with migrant communities to

understand the effects of policies and the types of modifications needed to improve migrants' lives (Tungohan, 2016).

Finally, a fourth level presents opportunities for political scientists to empower the public or stakeholder groups that are often the subjects of their work. This engagement not only works to ensure that multiple parties benefit more substantially from research findings, but also usually means the findings themselves are better informed and grounded in the practical experiences and insight of stakeholders. In terms of a methodological approach, scholars practicing community-based participatory research (CBPR) would characterize this level. Scholars practicing research in this category place an equal focus on capacity building within the stakeholder group rather than simply concentrating on peer-reviewed and scholarly inputs and outputs. Engagement activities include trainings for stakeholders (e.g., methods training) (Gabel and Cameron, 2016), activities that build capacity (e.g., providing Indigenous elders with digital skill training) (Gabel et al., 2016a), and shared outputs that are co-designed *with*, and directly benefit, the stakeholder. The intention of this level is to co-produce good quality scholarly work while putting knowledge into the hands of the affected organization or community that effectively boosts their capacity.

While there are many scholars in Indigenous Studies, for example, that employ these approaches (Henry et al., 2016), political scientists practicing in this realm are few and far between. McMaster's Chelsea Gabel's community-engaged work with Indigenous communities to understand how technology affects participation and governance with a focus on community empowerment is one example (Gabel et al., 2016b; Gabel and Goodman, 2019).

Figure 1: Spectrum of Public Engagement

	Lower Level of Public Engagement			**Higher Level of Public Engagement**
	INFORM	**INVOLVE**	**COLLABORATE**	**EMPOWER**
Public Engagement Activities	Including, but not limited to: open access peer-reviewed publications, op-eds, magazines, specialty industry journals (non peer-reviewed), technical reports, blogs, websites, podcasts, email lists, and participation in media interviews.	Social media engagement (i.e., Twitter, Facebook, Instagram), public talks, presentations, webinars.	Workshops with stakeholders and non-academic research partners, community exhibits (i.e., art exhibits, films, digital storytelling), co-publishing with stakeholders, co-hosting media interviews with stakeholders.	Public courses, training community members/ stakeholders, outputs shared with the public or public stakeholders that affect legislation and/or policy. The public leads the research and decides for themselves how to disseminate the work.
Impact	This is typically one-way engagement, from the scholar to the public or stakeholder and usually involves the translation and dissemination of scholarly findings/ research results.	This category encompasses activities that allow for limited public engagement through online comments, responses and questions, but does not include broader engagement.	Less typically engaged by political scientists collaborate involves slightly deeper engagement with the public or stakeholders. This can involve engaging them in the research process or outputs such as knowledge translation and mobilization, featuring their work to the public or policy community in open formats that are accessible to the public and allow for engagement (i.e., asking questions and dialogue).	This category focuses on empowerment and capacity building. It can involve educating members of the public and/or stakeholders, training to build capacity in the public or policy community, and/or taking community or stakeholder voice and translating into an output that affects social, economic or political change.
	Lower Level of Impact		**Higher Level of Impact**	

Conclusion

While the above mentioned levels will not apply to all scholars in all contexts, we argue that political scientists have a responsibility to engage as meaningfully as possible with those that they "research". Our community should also undertake knowledge mobilization and translation activities that extend beyond traditional scholarly activity seen as acceptable in the discipline of political science. Adopting a deeper, more holistic approach to knowledge mobilization and synthesis is increasingly important for the discipline of political science as a whole as it illustrates the practical value of our work, can enhance public dialogue and facilitates transdisciplinarity to develop solutions to some of our most pressing policy problems. If we truly want our findings to have broader impact the question is why more political scientists are not already bridging the upper echelons of the proposed model with their work. At the end of the day, what value are groundbreaking findings in a high impact journal delivering if they do not actually reach, or have a practical impact on, the community, organization or group being studied? While media coverage of research results are one way to disseminate such knowledge we have many more tools and research strategies at our disposal that could extend the impact of our work far beyond what is currently being realized. The final question, of course, is will we be able to represent this work as scholarship within our institutions and our field? Will those who evaluate our tenure and promotion files be able to understand the value and importance of this type of work? If it has become a siloed system aimed at status, elitism, and job security rather than collegial contribution to the stories of our time, then we may find our institutions and political science in particular, increasingly irrelevant as media creation, technology, and consumption evolves (Ditchburn, 2017). Breaking through traditional political science and university entrenched silos of carrying out and disseminating research has the potential to renew the relevance of our discipline.

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