

Public Scholarship Is Scholarship Webinar

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SPEAKERS

Megan Goodwin, Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 00:00

Hi, hello! This is Keeping It 101, a killjoy's introduction to religion podcast... webinar? We're talking about public scholarship IS scholarship.



Megan Goodwin 00:11

What's up nerds! We are delighted to be with you discussing why and how we should think about the work we do in public as a valuable and scholarly contribution to, mmm, the greater good.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 00:28

I'm Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst, an Associate Professor of Religion and the Associate Director of the UVM Humanities Center at the University of Vermont.



Megan Goodwin 00:39

I am Megan Goodwin, the program director of Sacred Writes, W-R-I-T-E-S, which is a Henry Luce Foundation funded proj- or, program, project-- it's a whole thing-- uh, hosted by Northeastern University, which promotes public scholarship on religion. We are delighted to be joining you today. Today, we are talking to you about why and how we should think about public scholarship, AS scholarship! Because public scholarship IS scholarship. It's literally in the name.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 01:11

Indeed, it is. I think far too often in our graduate training, in our classrooms, in our conversations, both on and off campus, we think about a hierarchy of scholarship where we've got books and monographs, particularly if you are in the humanities, and journal articles, and then way down somewhere at the bottom near book reviews, we've got things like op-eds, public lectures, podcasts. And we're here to tell you that that is some bologne.



Megan Goodwin 01:41

Incorrect. Incorrect. Not near book reviews, I say just having turned one in.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 01:48

I mean, I've got three on my desk that need doing. So, I'm both being facetious, listeners, and I'm trying to highlight the ways in which we often think about public scholarship as service, as opposed to expertise. Sometimes that's peer reviewed, in fact, but nevertheless, is the ways in which you use your expertise to serve a greater population.



Megan Goodwin 02:12

Absolutely.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 02:13

So let's jump in.



Megan Goodwin 02:14

Yeah! Let's- let's do it. For me, thinking about public scholarship as scholarship starts and ends with dismantling our assumptions about what scholarship is, and what real, or true, or pure scholarship is. So, we're going to talk you through some points, starting with, mmm, if you are using your expertise, you were doing scholarship, regardless of whether you were doing it in a peer reviewed tier- top tier journal, or whether you're having a conversation with your neighbors at the library. We are thinking about who our audience is, and who our audience COULD be. We're thinking about who else could we be collaborating with and learning from? How our expertise makes public scholarship possible, the fact that making our scholarship accessible does not mean we are dumbing it down, and then finally, not to be mercenary, but, mmm, being able to explain what you do and why it's important also makes you fundable! AND, if you can't explain to folks who are not experts in your field why your work is important, it makes it very hard to survive in the academy. And these are unprecedented times during which (and I don't have to tell ANY of you) the humanities are absolutely under attack.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 03:35

Yeah, all of that. So why don't we jump right in so that folks can spend their pandemic exhaustion with us in a economical way.



Megan Goodwin 03:46

Love that. Love that.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 03:49



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 03:49

So let's talk about reimagining your audience. Often, we (and by we, here, I mean I, your favorite, I hope, Islamic Studies scholar)--



Megan Goodwin 04:00

Absolutely.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 04:01

I often write things with my CV in mind.



Megan Goodwin 04:06

Mmm.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 04:07

Right? As someone who has only recently gotten off the tenure track hustle, meaning that I earned tenure--



Megan Goodwin 04:13

Yeah, you did!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 04:13

--in one of these unicorn, nonexistent jobs in the humanities (and specifically in religion), most of my early writing in my career was just about getting it published. Don't care if it ever gets read again, just needs to be out there. It needs to be on the CV. And with my first book, it needs to be physical. The joke that my advisor told me and that I tell everyone that listens is, "Does it hold the door open?" Because that's it. That's all I needed. That's a really terrible way to think about an audience, which is to say, I did NOT think about my audience, even a little. But in public scholarship, the opposite is true. Who I am talking to matters the MOST. Because they don't want to hear whatever I'm putting in my academic paywalled journal article that's written for, again, literally no one in my imagination.



Megan Goodwin 05:10

So sad.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 05:12

It is sad! But it's also like, like, that's the economics of this job! So, like, the opposite is true in public scholarship. So if you are someone, like me, who was trained to write either for a very small audience of fellow experts on 19th century practices in South Asia--



Megan Goodwin 05:30

Tell them about the rifles.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 05:31

--you might, you might need to rejigger that. So, you need to care about who you're talking to AND you need to not imagine those people as inferior, or as dumb, or as ignorant with that negative tone that that usually carries. You need to imagine your audience-- frankly, in the way that I do, if this is helpful-- as your-your students, or the audience at a conference. These are engaged people who want to know more about something that you happen to know more about, but that they often have a stake in and may know quite a lot about already.



Megan Goodwin 06:15

They might not even be positioned to realize they have a stake in it. And what an amazing opportunity to include more people in the conversation. When we're thinking about audience and public scholarship, for me, this is where I try to follow the lead of like our colleagues in disability studies. It's not about us being better, it's about meeting our audience where they're at. And I think, Ilyse, your sense of having to reorder our priorities is exactly correct. Because if you're not thinking about who your audience is, and why they should care, in as clear and concise and as engaging a way as possible, you will have no audience and thus, no public scholarship (because public scholarship requires, in fact, a public). So wanting to meet people where they're at, wanting your work to invite people in rather than prove a point or check a box is where public scholarship begins.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 07:10

Where public scholarship goes, is in, frankly, any number of directions. But you get this-- you get the opportunity to change the way people are thinking about the questions you are asking simply by involving people that are not already asking those questions. Right?



Megan Goodwin 07:31

Yeah!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 07:32

So you get to shift the conversation by bringing more people into that conversation. More importantly, you get to reorder your own thinking, because usually, community members, audience members, people you work with, have ways of thinking, or talking, or approaching a subject that are not your way of thinking, or talking, or approaching a subject. Just like we often learn from our students while we're teaching, and hone our skills of communication while we're teaching, so too does public scholarship offer us that opportunity. And importantly, that is part of scholarship. Because when we think about scholarship, we're often thinking about citations and credentials, right? Who I cite shows off what I know. But if what we're doing in humanities is thinking about, I don't know, humans, then putting a line under who gets to participate and who does not--



Megan Goodwin 08:30

Who doesn't count as human? Oh, no.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 08:32

--or who counts as human, and who doesn't, is a really... let's say heinous look for 2021. It's not great.



Megan Goodwin 08:41

Mm mm.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 08:42

And so when I say that public scholarship is scholarship, I mean that your sources, your citations, your methods might shift slightly, but that does not mean that those conversation partners, those resources, those places to mine, and allow data to be mined from you, those are not illogical, irrelevant or inappropriate. It is just a bigger and more democratic way of thinking about knowledge production.



Megan Goodwin 09:12

Yeah! And like, let's be honest-- that's scary! Man, there is a safety in knowing that only three people are going to read this, you know, highfalutin egghead argument that you're putting out into the world. It is scary and potentially dangerous to open your thinking and your perspectives to folks beyond the safety of your discipline, or your department, or your academic guild. But it also means you're inviting in so many new perspectives, and soooo many new questions that you might not have thought of otherwise. I talk about this a lot when I talk about my book, "Abusing Religion" (which came out through Rutgers in 2020), but... the theoretical framework of that project happened out loud and in public through informal kind of op-ed spaces, and also just on my Twitter thread! I would be thinking things through out loud, and because social media is what it is, I'm pulling in people from political theory, I'm pulling in people from disability studies, I'm pulling people in from any number of fields, that I didn't have time or space to take classes in while I was in grad school. But they have different ways of approaching these questions that we all care about from different perspectives. So, yeah! One of the true gifts, to my mind, of public scholarship is getting to talk to so many new, different, exciting folks about something that we all care about, even if we care about in different ways, or use different language or different theoretical frameworks to think through.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 09:23

All of that said, I think I'd like to talk a little bit about-- let's talk about the stumbling block, right?



Megan Goodwin 10:58

Yeah!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 10:59

The idea that public scholarship is not legitimate scholarship comes, in some ways, because anyone can do it, right?



Megan Goodwin 11:06

Mhm.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 11:06

Anyone can plug in their microphone and make a podcast, like we did. The problem is, though, is that the reason that our public scholarship, public humanities podcast is successful--



Megan Goodwin 11:18

How many downloads is it now? I just--



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 11:20

Well over 50,000 downloads, which is kind of bizarre for a punk rock, GarageBand, self-funded, plug-in-your-microphone, and run by two PhDs podcast. The thing about it is, though, is that our expertise is the thing that makes our podcast possible. So. Thinking about public scholarship IS scholarship, or AS scholarship means taking seriously that the things I'm able to do in public is completely bolstered by the years of scholarship and study that has gone into making me an expert in the first place. That might sound like, oxymoronic, or maybe circular, or possibly even like "Duh, Ilyse, why do you need to say that?" But I think for so many people, the understanding of like, "Public scholarship is just an egghead talking in public, what does that matter, my mom can write an op ed to the local paper," And I hear you, but you're wrong. Because public scholarship is really about translating your expertise in interesting and smart ways to reach a broader audience. All it is is making your expertise accessible. And so saying that that is not scholarship because it's not behind a paywall, or because it hasn't been double blind peer review, first of all misunderstands the history of a double blind peer review (which is ensconced in white supremacy), HOWEVER, it also misunderstands the point of expertise. And if the point of expertise is just cloister it and pull it away from the public and silo it into Ivy League institutions, then congratulations! You are also participating in a history of white, wealthy Christian supremacy. But if you don't think that, if you think that what you know is important, if you pull your hair out watching TV because some writer somewhere didn't know what you know about your subject... then you need to be participating in public scholarship and you need to be seeing public scholarship as one avenue for expertise; one avenue for knowledge production.



Megan Goodwin 13:33

Absolutely. I also want to suggest that public scholarship is radically peer reviewed, it just forces us to rethink who our peers are (which, errrrr, many of us do not like to do). And that's not to say that everyone who reads whatever or listens to whatever on the internet is your scholarly peer, but they are your pure human. Right? So, if you're being in conversation with those folks, this is an opportunity to think about, "Alright, if they're misreading me, how else could I be making this point?" And obviously, the internet is full of bad actors and you can't do anything about people who don't actually read past your headline, which you might or might not have written anyway. But! If you are careful

about cultivating your networks online, if you make it a point to be in conversation with any number of folks who care about these issues, you will find people who do not have your expertise, helping you think through your ideas in better, richer, more exciting, more engaging ways.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 14:36

Absolutely.



Megan Goodwin 14:36

And yeah! I, one of the things that we come back to over and over again in Sacred Writes is, A.) you know something, and what you know matters, but B.) don't start by assuming nobody cares about what you care about. There are always ways to find introductions and windows into the area that you've spent most of your life researching. It's just figuring out ways to do that translation work. And it's possible! Start by, again, thinking about your audience, but also, why did you get excited about this? What kind of questions does this help you answer? What core ideas are working here that make this exciting for you to go back to over and over and over again? If you can share those points of enthusiasm and interest, you can do public scholarship. And you don't want to start by assuming you know what public scholarship looks like, right? Op eds are a thing that we can easily point to, but podcasts count, YouTube series count, programming at your local library or museum counts, having conversations with local or higher up legislators counts. There's any number of ways to take what you know, out into the greater world. And hopefully, you will use this humble webinar as an opportunity to do just that.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 15:59

Absolutely. We talk a lot about accessibility, and we talk about it in two ways. The first is literal accessibility: Are the products that you're making accessible to a variety of users within the framework of disability studies? Do you have transcripts for things like podcasts? Are there captions in your webinars? Are you thinking about alt text when you're posting posters? Are you having ASL translators, interpreters, rather, at your public events? So one is a very literal accessibility. But the other piece of accessibility that we are really obsessed with when we're thinking about public scholarship being scholarship is the stumbling block that many folks have where making it accessible to a wider public means watering it down, dumbing it down to such a degree that it is no longer expertise at all. It's like a Wikipedia entry. And I think we want to steer you away from that.



Megan Goodwin 16:57


We sure do.





Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 16:57


Because, again, that's a poor way of thinking about both what your expertise can do in the world, and thinking about what your expertise can benefit from other forms of experts. So as a scholar of Islam, I work on manuscripts, history, discourse analysis, sometimes (though rarely) I talk to people. But to act as if Muslims don't have something to add, something to contribute, something to suggest to the way that I'm talking about their own history, their own lives, their own ancestors, would be, like, an outrageous violence. And so, I don't imagine my work as needing to be dumbed down, I do think that there are different languages that I might use, but I think of that

more as code switching (to borrow that framework) than I do about watering things down. So I urge you to think about accessibility as part of what scholarship is. None of us writing in the humanities who use other languages are just dropping in those foreign, those non-English languages, into our essays. Right? We write in English and then, in the parenthetical, we might put the French, or put the Persian, or put the Sanskrit. Or whatever. It's the same translation work.


 Megan Goodwin 17:24
Mhm!

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 17:49
You're switching your vocabulary. Go ahead, sorry.

 Megan Goodwin 18:23
Yeah, no, no, no. I tend to think of it as curation, right? Like, no museum exhibit is going to have the entirety of the works of, I don't know, Basquiat, that's the last exhibit I saw. You can't have everything. What you have are representative examples. So if I am talking to, say, a journalist, about why it's important to think about religion in terms of practice, rather than just belief, I am not going to give them, you know, 50 minutes on the history of Secularism, and Protestantism, and why Christian imperialism means we assume that religion equals belief. What I will say is, most religions of the world are honestly more about practice than they are about belief. If they have follow up questions, I am happy to give them sources. That's not dumbing it down, it's summing it up! Which is what we do in introductory classes. And that's a lot of the work that happens in public scholarship. It's not that you're not drawing on the depth and breadth of your expertise. It's that you're talking to folks who don't have your training. And you're inviting them in to that conversation by giving them the headline level information. And if they want to know more, good news for them and for you, you know so much more! But let's start the conversation rather than shutting it down by alienating folks with language and concepts that just don't make anybody want to go any further.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 19:44
The other thing is is that when you are writing and talking in an accessible language, you are making yourself legible. And the reality is is that in a market, and I'm using economic language on purpose, but in a market that is devaluing and defunding the humanities, being legible equals fundability, if that's a word?

 Megan Goodwin 20:05
Yup! *giggles* I made it up.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 20:06
But we are-- I mean, it seems about right. I think that, um, the more accessible you can be in the habit of making your research, the more easy it is to then pitch funding of your research to a variety of shareholders, stakeholders, and grantors. So the NEH is one really important place to think about it. But they only have a certain number of

them. And they're really competitive. Your local humanities councils in every state has funding, but it usually assumes that it's benefiting the citizens and publics of your state. So that accessible language there is incredibly crucial in order to do your research, right? So thinking about legibility as a plus, as a strength, and as a strategy to fund your more specific and more myopic, shall we say, research projects is really important. I know we have had some success in our, in our funding recently, where we're pitching a multi-pronged approach. Where we pitch a public component AND a more traditional, scholarly journal kind of product. And so thinking about those legibilities so that you are not just attractive to various kinds of funders, but so that the people on those granting boards who are not experts in the thing that you are experts on can have a sense of what the stakes of your project is, is just good scholarship in 2021.



Megan Goodwin 21:41

100%. Because, you know, the scientist reviewing your NEH grant application isn't stupid, but she doesn't have your background. So how do you make it make sense to her? You have to use accessible, translatable language. So yeah, I mean, hmm.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 22:01

I would say also that, you know, scientists are not reviewing your NEH ???



Megan Goodwin 22:04

That's true, they're not humanities. *laughs*



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 22:06

They're not. But, what-what-what is happening is that the NEH is more and more looking to fund projects that have a clear and tangible and, frankly, countable impact for the tax dollars that are being spent. And we can debate til the cows come home, the neoliberal nonsense of all of this, but that is what grantors are looking for more and more. And so the better you're positioning yourself within those systems already, the more likely you are to raise to the top of the pile.



Megan Goodwin 22:38

Yes. All of that. Basically, make it makes sense, makes it easier to fund. So. Help them help you!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 22:45

The other benefit, Megan, of being legible is that being illegible... in this economy?! It means _____.



Megan Goodwin 22:56

laughs



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 22:57

And I say that as a member of a department who, late in 2020, was announced to be on the chopping block, despite every member of our department having won some award at some point in their career, despite our classes being full, despite most of us having won extramural grants, right? So like, having a high profile, high... polish, traditional CVs. Being illegible would have been troubling. Because we were legible, because, as a department, we are engaged in public scholarship, because we are clued into systems and networks of publics, the outcry to support us was, frankly, deafening.



Megan Goodwin 23:46

Yeah.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 23:47

And that really helped. We had many administrators turn around and say, "We did not realize how this was so valuable. We, a bunch of scientists, did not think that religion was super valuable." It turns out being inundated with complaints and letters--



Megan Goodwin 24:05

From all over the world!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 24:06

From all over! Meant something. Now, did that mean everything? Absolutely not. Does that mean that we're out of the woods? Do not ever say that because that's not the case for any of us in humanities departments. And as we've talked about at the NEHC, this is a coming and persistent wave of cuts in the humanities (that perhaps COVID-19 accelerated or exacerbated?). But the writing's been on the wall for a number of decades now. To be illegible is frankly to sign your own death warrant. It doesn't mean you'll survive if you don't, but to not be legible is hobbling yourself in a way that doesn't- doesn't, for me, make a lot of sense when so much of the argument against public scholarship is just snobbery.



Megan Goodwin 24:53

Mm. No, absolutely. If you are- if you are illegible, you are expendable. If you cannot communicate to your university or your institution why you have value-- not just because scholarship is valuable but because the humans that make up the humanities need to understand your stuff to live in the world-- without that, there's no reason to keep you. Again, it doesn't mean that they will keep you, but it makes it harder to get rid of you-- which, again, if you followed last years... kerfuffle? Question mark? You can see that Ilyse's department made it very, very difficult for their university to justify eliminating them altogether.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 25:37

So a quick recap-- public scholarship is scholarship. And we can argue about where public scholarship fits on, say, a

So a quick recap – public scholarship IS scholarship. And we can argue about where public scholarship fits on, say, a CV or a reappointment promotion and tenure committee, but for the most part, we really care that public scholarship, for you, dear listener, counts as scholarship in your mind so that you start to invest part of your writing and research time around it. But what you need to do to get that done is, as we said, reimagine your audience, think about new approaches and conversation partners, not imagine this as dumbing down or watering down, but rather making yourself legible and accessible both for funding purposes and for, like, the ability for the humanities to survive in the academy, but also just so that you can translate the expertise that you find so valuable to more readers, listeners, observers.



Megan Goodwin 26:41

Absolutely. This has been Keeping It 101, a killjoy's introduction to religion podcast, on why public scholarship IS scholarship. Thank you all so much for joining us, and thanks once again to the New England Humanities Consortium for their generous support of our work.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 26:57

Peace out nerds.



Megan Goodwin 26:59

Do your homework! It's on the syllabus.