Making the Case for Academia's Engagement in Knowledge: Mobilization and Purposeful Public Scholarship in Social Media

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Abstract:

To make the case for academia's engagement in knowledge mobilization and public scholarship in social media, we begin by providing a justification for the use of new technological modes for integrating scholarly endeavors. As an example, Sun Tzu's Art of War philosophy is applied to academic scholarship within the present school reform discourse and education privatization landscape. Next, we discuss how public scholarship in social media can impact aspects of the profession such as peer-reviewed work, the tenure process and commitment to community-engaged research. We conclude that public scholarship and the mobilization of empirical work into social media is an important endeavor to address the persisting lack of scholarly influence and relevance of academics in the public discourse.

Keywords: *public knowledge, public scholarship, social media*

It comes as little surprise that President Donald Trump and U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos have continued the market-oriented educational reforms that were championed by George W. Bush, Barack Obama and their Secretaries of Education (Richardson, 2017). That continuation is explicitly because of a persisting belief in the "manufactured crisis" which Berliner & Biddle (1995) argued is a political framing that the U.S. public education system is failing writ large. Furthermore, the failure narrative is being perpetuated by hundreds of millions of dollars that are being spent by foundations to sway public perception towards education privatization and private-control (Blume, 2015). Malin and Lubienski (2015) found that media outlets, stakeholders, and policymakers often get their information and soundbites originating from pro-privatization reform organizations in traditional media. Think tanks and intermediary organizations alike are also increasingly spending to sway public perception in print, online, and social media (Vasquez Heilig, Brewer, & Adamson, in press). As a result, Facebook, Twitter and other technological mediums represent new and important forums for public discourse and knowledge mobilization.

Most academics are not engaged in purposeful debates that include empirically based information in the public discourse (Berliner & Glass, 2014). Should academics refrain—or at least pretend—to not engage in the public discourse and knowledge mobilization? Central to a discussion about the role of the academic in public discourse and knowledge mobilization is defining the importance and breadth of public scholarship. Academics often must weigh the contextual intricacies of their particular institution of higher education and gauge whether they are able to balance engagement in the public discourse relative to the culture of their home institution. In some places,

it may be seen as improper to leverage the resources and platform of a faculty position in a university to engage in public scholarship, while in other institutions it may be welcomed and encouraged.

Historically, the modus operandi of academics has been primarily to teach, research, populate journals with articles and author books. Scholarly knowledge is then commoditized by publishers and shielded behind paywalls. Considering the current information age, and the evolving role of scholarship in the new, free technological canvas of social media, an important set of meta questions are: Is the role of an academic only to provide insights and research for the improvement of the collective good in traditional scholarly realms? Or should academics also engage scholarly work in social media to mobilize knowledge and impact the public discourse?

Also, how should academia define public scholarship? Is it op-eds, testifying at state capitols, or traditional media interviews? Does it include engagement on Facebook and Twitter and other social media platforms? Podcasts? Certainly each of these methods can be defined as some type of public scholarship in that access to the work and perspective is publicly available and more accessible than peer-reviewed journals and books. Many academics have, in response external requests, engaged in traditional modes of public scholarship such as contributing to print (magazines and newspapers), broadcast media (television and radio) and speaking to elected officials (testifying and consulting). While these forms of public scholarship are vitally important, academics should take a more proactive, rather than reactive, approach to public scholarship by participating in social media.

Art of War, Public Scholarship and Privatization

To make the case for academia's engagement in public discourse and knowledge mobilization in social media as conceptual framework, Sun Tzu's (2009) *Art of War* philosophy is applied to academic scholarship within the present school reform discourse and education privatization landscape. Sun Tzu suggested: "Appear at points which the enemy must hasten to defend; march swiftly to places where you are not expected." So, while many academics have involved themselves in traditional public scholarship interactions, most have largely avoided social media engagement for knowledge mobilization. Academics should march to such places where they are not expected.

The common discourse surrounding public education in the United States has for decades centered around negative tropes about public education specifically because it is managed by federal, state, and local democratic governance (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). This political framing was influenced by the growth of Friedmanism (Friedman, 1955), which holds that government is necessarily inefficient and that the free market is necessarily more efficient, and therefore more effective and desirable. This neoliberal framing continues to be a popular line of logic in the public discourse. It is of little surprise, then, that Secretary DeVos has escalated the market-based ideology of Friedmanism during her tenure by proposing billions for education privatization (Vasquez Heilig & Clark, 2018).

Partnered with the negative tropes about the U.S. public school system—and the neoliberal argument to turn public education over to private management by way of a free market—is the ongoing myth of failed teachers and schools (Kumashiro, 2012). Surveys conducted across the country reveal each year that parents often rate their local schools as effective but, more generally, rate the state of public education and teachers across the country as dismal (Lopez, 2010). This is largely due to the effectiveness of the privatization reformers' misinformation campaign to support

privatization as the best solution for ongoing challenges and inequities in the U.S. public education system. The success of this political framing in the public discourse is precisely why academics must counter non-empirically based privatization rhetoric with research and data. Academics have, for decades, outlined the real causes of achievement gaps—opportunity and resource inequality (Ball, 1994, 2003; Berliner, 2013; Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Biddle, 2014; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Brill, 2011; Carter & Welner, 2013; Coleman, 1990; Coleman et al., 1966; Ennis, 1976; Freire, 1970/1992; Glass, 2008; Irons, 2002; Jencks et al., 1972; Labaree, 1988; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Orfield & Ashkinaze, 1991; Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Ravani, 2011; Rothstein, 2004) but that conversation has largely taken place in paywalled, peer-reviewed journal articles and in costly academic books.

The collective work of academics is credited by media outlets for causing some dissonance for organizations that are nodes in the privatization and private management education reform movement such as Teach For America (TFA) (Allen, 2015; Brown, 2016; Hansen, 2015; Jacobin, 2015; Schaefer, 2015; Singer, 2016; Teran, 2016). Is this ideological disruption the result of publishing scholarly work in paid-subscription journals and books, or the focus on bringing that knowledge into public spaces? We proffer it is the latter. As a result, now is the time for a discussion in the field about technological modes for integrating academic scholarship into social media to discuss alternative policy approaches that address student opportunity and resource inequality in an era of increasing private control in education.

The massive growth of for-profit and non-profit charter schools, school vouchers, and other forms of education privatization have exploded during the past two decades (Vasquez Heilig, 2013). Reform rhetoric, using what is seemingly commonsensical language, has largely gone unchallenged across traditional media and often creates policy echo chambers (Goldie, Linick, Jabbar, & Lubienski, 2014). For example, organizations that are central nodes in the education privatization cabal (TFA, Democrats for Education Reform, etc.) have long held positions as influential media contributors (Vasquez Heilig, Brewer, & Adamson, in press). And while there have been vocal challengers to pro-privatization education reform organizations, these organizations have largely enjoyed a self-created echo chamber in the national public discourse and shrugged off scholarly critiques of pervasive misinformation (Brewer & Wallis, 2015).

Sun Tzu (2009) said "You can be sure of succeeding in your attacks if you only attack places which are undefended. You can ensure the safety of your defense if you only hold positions that cannot be attacked" (p. 15). Journals, conceived of as a "battlefield," cannot typically be attacked by non-academics since entry onto that battlefield requires, among other considerations, expert research and writing abilities. Although, we do note that as millions of dollars in research funding has flowed from DeVos' U.S. Department of Education and billionaires' ideological foundations (i.e. Gates, Walton and Broad), the battlefield in peer-reviewed journals has become more contested over time (Vasquez Heilig, Brewer, & Adamson, in press). Nevertheless, publishing in peer-reviewed journals is not enough— this form of scholarship must be mobilized for various stakeholder audiences in traditional and social media for a greater effect on the public discourse.

Pro-privatization and private control education reform groups have fomented misinformation through their dominance over traditional media battlefields and created echo chambers that lack empirical perspectives because academic research is typically isolated in the proverbial ivory tower. So, while the battlefields of journals are positions that cannot typically be easily infiltrated by outsiders, it is the empirical positions that can crisscross battlefields that could be more contentious (i.e. social media and journals). The problem, however, is that the contentious grounds of social media are surely not undefended battlegrounds. So, while scholars cannot have a guarantee

of succeeding in such battlegrounds, they must lean on their empirical findings as secure from purely ideological attacks as they introduce research into public spaces in social media and elsewhere.

While pro-privatization education reformers have gained significant ground in the K-12 battlefield through their dominance across the various modes of traditional media discourse, pro-privatization attacks have also crept into higher education—presenting a new contentious ground. Standardization and outcomes assessment mechanisms linked to funding, a decrease in direct state and federal funding, and the push to outsource the funding of research away from the state and into private venture philanthropic hands are increasing financial pressures in higher education (Worthen, 2018). If academics point to a lack of time as the reason they don't engage in public scholarship in social media, that is likely due to the ground lost on this new contentious battlefield as the privatization mentality has redefined—and in many cases increased—the workloads of faculty. As an academic's work centers around a broad push for grant-funded activities, funding and support for research have, in the same way of the K-12 battlefield, been shifted to private control. Furthermore, grants were historically linked to good ideas, but the largest non-governmental grant funders are now highly politicized (i.e. Gates Foundation, Walton Family Foundation) and have not historically provided funding for researchers and research that doesn't align with their ideological dispositions (Vasquez Heilig, Brewer, & Adamson, in press).

Academics hold well to the position of peer-reviewed work. But, again, the problem is bringing that work into public spaces. Sun Tzu said,

> On the field of battle, the spoken word does not carry far enough: hence the institution of gongs and drums. Nor can ordinary objects be seen clearly enough: hence the institution of banners and flags. Gongs and drums, banners and flags, are means whereby the ears and eyes of the host may be focused on one particular point. (Tzu, 2009, p. 21)

Given the current technological and information age, social media represents modern gongs, drums, banners and flags. And if that is true, and considering that Sun Tzu said, "He who can modify his tactics in relation to his opponent and thereby success in winning, may be called a heaven-born captain" (Tzu, 2009, p. 18). The fact that public discourse continues to latch onto non-empirical information and political ideology propagated by education reformers (Vasquez Heilig, Brewer, & Adamson, in press) suggests that the field's satisfaction with publishing scholarly work primarily in peer-reviewed journals and books that are housed behind paywalls needs to be reexamined. Academics should not cease to publish in academic journals and books, but there is a clear need to create ancillary work from scholarly peer-reviewed publications and books that can be disseminated in both traditional and social media.

Where should a scholar engage? Sun Tzu suggested that there were six different kinds of terrain: (1) accessible ground, (2) entangling ground, (3) temporizing ground, (4) narrow passes, (5) precipitous heights, and (6) positions at a great distance from the enemy. Accordingly,

> Ground which can be freely traversed by both sides is called accessible…with regard to ground of this nature, be before the enemy in occupying the raised and sunny spots, and carefully guard your line of supplies. Then you will be able to fight with advantage. (Tzu, 2009, p. 30)

Public scholarship in social media represents accessible ground because of the open access nature of the platforms. While anti-privatization activists have made some progress in occupying this ground (i.e. Badass Teachers Association), much of it has been ignored by academics. Policy circles and audiences with policymakers represent entangling ground in that it is a "ground which can be abandoned but is hard to re-occupy" (Tzu, 2009, p. 30). Gaining an audience with social media users is a long-term and exceedingly difficult task. However, once you have built an audience and have shown that educational policies should be bolstered by research findings rather than ideology, the entangled ground becomes more secure. Failure to maintain an empirical voice within that ground would open the field back up to those who would attempt to sway policymakers using ideology and, as a result, the ground would be hard to re-occupy.

Considering the current educational policy landscape, there seem to be few temporizing grounds where neither side has an advantage at making the first move. There are some narrow passes in the sense of long-held solidarity among progressive education groups (i.e. teachers associations, community-based non-profits and alliances). However, as pro-privatization education reformers expand their policy reach and oversight of charter schools and school vouchers, they are establishing their own narrow passes. Integrating academic scholarship and activism through various social media platforms enables scholars to contribute to an ongoing public conversation surrounding public education that often lacks such perspectives and stems the reinforcement of many of the myths about education that are promoted by pro-privatization reformers.

A well-known problematic challenge for engaging in social media is that conversations in many platforms often disintegrate into ad hominem, non-empirical and personal attacks that are encouraged by the semi-anonymous nature of social media. To this, Sun Tzu said, "Do not swallow bait offered by the enemy" (Tzu, 2009, p. 22) and, considering one of the five dangerous faults, one should avoid a "hasty temper, which can be provoked by insults" (Tzu, 2009, p. 24). Social media conversations are monitored by pro-privatization reformers and they often activate other supporters of education privatization to engage in online "trolling." However, because they know that academics hold an empirical position that cannot be defeated with ideology, they, more often than not, resort to personal attacks. While it is often tempting for academics to respond to those attacks— even simply to defend oneself— the employment of Tzu's philosophy holds that scholars ought to avoid such a "dangerous fault" and (re)focus the conversation back to empirical data and research.

Implementing Notions of Public Scholarship into Academia

As specifically discussed above, by using Sun Tzu's ancient *Art of War* text as a conceptual framework for public scholarship examining education privatization, it is clear that the mobilization of knowledge in the public discourse can evolve from the proverbial analog to digital. The education stakeholders and citizens of today now engage in conversations about education across all borders on many social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, etc.). As a result, we now turn to a discussion about how academics can develop and implement a purposeful public scholarship ecology into the norms of scholarly work.

The technological canvas that scholars sometime resist because of perceived time limitations is actually a conduit by which they can bridge distance and place. Creating personal and institutional technological ecologies in academia can create the connections that have never been possible in history. This approach is not a this-*or*-that proposition, but instead is a this-*and*-that proposition. Academics should continue many of the traditional ways of approaching research,

scholarship, and service (i.e. peer-reviewed journal articles and books). However, with personal and institutional technological ecologies, academics can enhance scholarly work in new ways that haven't been possible prior to this age. And it is not just publicly engaged scholars who see the opportunity. *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof suggested that, "Professors today have a growing number of tools available to educate the public, from online courses to blogs to social media" (Kristof, 2014 as cited in Malin & Lubienski, 2015, p. 14). We now turn to discuss how these notions should impact several aspects of academia: the release of scholarly work, the tenure process and interaction with communities.

Release of Scholarly Work

Much of public scholarship is misunderstood as requiring work that is entirely different than the academic work that is published in journals and books. However, engagement in social spaces simply requires that scholars translate academic work into publicly digestible portions while using more accessible language that limits academic jargon. To the extent that scholars publish academic work in a LinkedIn post, the writing of a blog, or even a post on Twitter summarizing the findings, can drive traffic to articles—readers that would otherwise not go to academic journals and books for the research presented within.

Again, engaging in public scholarship is not an "either/or" proposition but an "and" proposition. Academics still need to publish scholarly work in peer-reviewed journals and books. The peer-review journal and book authoring processes are very important because these scholarly endeavors are educative experiences. The labor that goes into scholarly work— from field work, the conversations, the literature review, background work, and the collaboration with students and colleagues—is transformative. The completion of the research and writing process results in expertise about the topics in a faculty member's agenda while also providing an opportunity to receive and provide mentoring. The edification process should not end there. When scholars publish articles and books, they should undertake a few additional steps to make their work more readily available and mobilize their knowledge. Those actions should include, but not be limited to,

- Utilizing university press release process and public relations staff to gauge whether traditional media will cover the work;
- Writing a short policy brief or executive summary about it, and sharing it with local and state policymakers, school board members, and community-based organizations; and,
- Using social media by tweeting about it, sharing as a LinkedIn article, writing a Facebook post with a live link to the article, blogging about it, sharing pdfs of the work on Academia.edu, ResearchGate, and perhaps create a podcast.

Often, when scholars publish peer-reviewed articles and books, they are quick to move on and neglect the opportunity to publicize their scholarly work beyond traditional modes. The lack of innovative knowledge mobilization has limited the impact of peer-reviewed articles and books in the public discourse. For example, research on peer review has found that one-third of social science and more than 80% of humanities articles are never cited (Remler, 2014). Furthermore, while the number of academic books rose by 45%, from 43,000 to 63,000 between 2005 and 2014, the average sales per title fell from 100 to 60 (Jubb, 2017). Considering these dismal findings, it's incumbent on academics to find ways to mobilize knowledge beyond peer-reviewed journals and

books to make knowledge more available to the public. In sum, for the work to be more impactful in the world, make it readily available.

Altametrics in the Tenure Process

The tradition of the primacy of research, teaching, and service are the most untouchable aspects of tenure in academia. How can the field evolve the "publish or perish" profession to include holding value for academics who engage in public scholarship and knowledge mobilization? The interest here is to address what universities have historically considered "academic" or "scholarly" work. To be sure, new career professors are expected to publish academic articles in top-tier journals to establish themselves as "academic" and "scholarly." The consequence for failing to publish widely and teach expertly results in "perishing" from an institution, and often the profession.

Ultimately, institutions of higher education desire that their faculty are impactful in the field, yet the tenure process typically only measures traditional notions of that impact (i.e. awards, grants, selectivity of journal and book publishers, etc.) Altametrics are evolving conceptions of academic scholarship in the midst of academia's publish or perish paradigm. They are a contemporary, more constructivist, and perhaps visionary in its approach to measure the "impact" of research dissemination. The use of altmetrics to measure impact of scholarly work includes assessing references in bibliographic databases, Google scholar ratings, abstract and article views online, downloads, or mentions in social media and news media (Topper, Tefera, & Fischman, 2014).

Topper, Tefera, and Fischman argued that as the field creates broader-based platforms for the assessment of the impact and dissemination of scholarly research, that rigor will improve when informed by multiple dialogs with relevant publics and ultimately for the public good. To drive altametric prestige, academics would need to make peer-reviewed journal articles more readily available online, including social media and new media platforms like Academia.edu and ResearchGate. In this way, academics would be able to increased their impact in the public space and would ultimately also be rewarded in the tenure and promotion process for their public engagement.

Public Scholarship and Communities

Here's the reality of the education landscape—or battlefield, to draw from Sun Tzu: the top-down nature of pro-privatization reform in communities has prompted educators, students, parents, and citizens alike to question the methods and means of the reformers (Brewer, Vasquez Heilig, Gunderson, & Brown, 2018). The expansion of social media has empowered how communities organize, talk, and engage in the public discourse about schools and school reform. As a result, public scholarship in social media can be relevant and important for addressing societal inequities by focusing on engaging scholarly work in online community conversations.

There are a variety of factors that influence scholarly work. Clearly, current policy contexts, grants and personal interests—among other factors—can influence scholarly endeavors in terms of the types of research questions that scholars ask. The traditional components of academia should still influence scholarship. First, the research in the field that is submitted for peer review in journals and conferences where academics conduct scholarly work can inspire the direction of research and inform the newer, cutting-edge work on the different topics that impact education

policy. Second, the evolution of theory should also impact scholarly work. The advance of theory exposes faculty to the most recent thinking for the field to help drive scholarly activity.

However, community-engaged scholars should also stay in tune with what is happening in real time at the local, state, and national levels. Community interests and needs can and should influence scholarly work beyond the traditional processes and motivations. Incentivizing engaging in discussions with non-profit, civil rights and other community-based organizations should inspire and influence research. Despite their important and useful expertise, few academics are involved directly in conversations with non-profit, civil rights and other community-based organizations. Whether they are local organizations like IDRA (Intercultural Development Research Association) or, at the state or national level, with organizations such as UnidosUS or NAACP (National Advancement for the Association of Colored People), scholarly expertise and independence are highly desired and needed.

Educational leaders should challenge and incentivize faculty—especially faculty of color— to reach out to non-profit, civil rights and other community-based organizations for these purposes. Employing the academic skill set to investigate research questions for non-profit, civil rights and other community-based organizations to engage in knowledge mobilization in social media is a ripe area for innovation. Most academics have expert abilities to write, organize, and speak that go far and beyond particular research skill sets and topics. Acting as community-engaged public scholar allies for non-profit, civil rights and other organizations is also a potential opportunity to rapidly make empirical research available at the local, state, and national levels in the social media of community-based organizations.

Conclusion

The purposeful engagement of scholarly work in social media to disseminate knowledge into the public discourse is a potential evolution of academia's mores. Faculty can immediately create a larger impact of scholarly work in the public space by exploring the opportunity and challenges in making research more accessible through knowledge mobilization strategies. The field of academia can do this by incentivizing these actions to increase the impact and usability of research by means of multi-dimensional, interactive social media strategies that target a wide range of stakeholders.

As the professoriate evolves in coming years, a future-forward public scholarship and research approach for academia should explore the opportunity and challenges in making research more accessible through purposeful knowledge mobilization strategies in social media. The role of the scholar no longer needs to be oft limited to the echo chambers of the ivory tower's peer-reviewed journals and books that are typically not widely read or used. Sun Tzu argued in *Art of War* that if you fight with all your might, there is a chance of life; but death is certain if you cling to your corner. A commitment to public scholarship and the mobilization of empirical work into social media is an important endeavor to address the persisting lack of scholarly influence and relevance of academics in the public discourse.

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