

## **REPORT OF THE ASA SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE EVALUATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND PUBLIC COMMUNICATION IN SOCIOLOGY**

**FINAL DRAFT -- March 5, 2016**

Leslie McCall, Northwestern (Chair)  
Gabriel Hetland, SUNY Albany  
Arne Kalleberg, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill  
Alondra Nelson, Columbia University  
Sarah Ovink, Virginia Tech  
Amy Schalet, University of Massachusetts, Amherst  
Laurel Smith-Dorr, University of Massachusetts, Amherst  
Michele Lamont, Harvard, ex-officio  
Annette Lareau, University of Pennsylvania, ex-officio  
Matt Wray, Temple, ex-officio

Given the growing prominence of social media, as well as the interest of many in public sociology, Annette Lareau, while serving as President of the ASA, convened a subcommittee of the Task Force on Social Media to consider how one might evaluate sociologists' contributions to social media and public sociology in merit, promotion, and tenure. Although the primary audience for the report would be Department Chairs, Deans, and other university officials, we also hope that the report will stimulate conversation on this important topic in numerous settings within and outside of the academy.

### **I. Definition**

Our subcommittee considered how to evaluate sociologists' use of social media and other forms of public communication as part of their professional work. We discussed a broad set of communication tools, including both traditional print (e.g., newspapers, magazines) and emerging digital outlets. We also reflected on a variety of activities, ranging from commenting on the news or using existing research findings to address timely issues, to "making news" by reporting original research results.

Generally speaking, we see the use of social media and public communication as *cross-cutting* the traditional categories of research, teaching and service. Sociologists could present research findings in Op-Eds for newspapers or write weblogs that might inform broad audiences about policy debates. Sociologists might also use various forms of social media in their teaching, in order to communicate sociological material more effectively to their students. And social media might be used to facilitate many kinds of service activities, such as making committees more effective in soliciting the views of colleagues on departmental or university issues, or enhancing the quality of peer reviews.

At the same time, we recognize that sociologists are most likely to use social media and other forms of public communication to disseminate *research* findings, as these constitute the core of the sociological enterprise, and thus that is our focus in this report. Moreover, some have suggested that the effort and expertise involved in public engagement of this kind may be substantial enough to constitute it as a fourth, self-contained category that is independent of the three traditional ones. We do not dismiss this possibility out of hand but encourage individual institutions to come to their own thoughtful conclusions after having considered the issues we lay out below.

## **II. General Rationale for the Report**

The objective of all forms of public engagement and communication is to expand the circulation of new information on topics that are studied by sociologists and are of interest to a wide range of constituencies. Even if one believes that the best research is done when insulated from overt, extra-scientific considerations, the products of such research often embed insights that have important implications for the lives of individuals and social groups throughout society. And even within the confines of academia itself, a central tenet of higher learning is that these insights be communicated as effectively as possible to students, fellow researchers, and grant agencies and other organizations that support research.

In this report, we describe the various ways that the dissemination process of new research is being altered especially by the rise of digital forms of media. Conventional forms of media have themselves been transformed and integrated into the new digital landscape, though we recognize that for many people the only difference might be reading the news off a computer screen rather than a printed page. Still, those who are *producing* the content of conventional media outlets are gathering information from blog posts, twitter feeds, individual web pages, and open-source journals, as well as from the historic bread and butter outlets of academic knowledge, such as university press monographs and proprietary journals. Policymakers and individual consumers, not to mention students, are obtaining information in these diverse ways as well. Consumers are routinely directed to these resources not only by media outlets but by university publishers and proprietary journals. In short, the *demand* for accessible scholarly information has grown tremendously with the advent of free digital platforms.

What are the implications of these shifts for how scholars conduct research and transmit their findings to other scholars, to students, and to those interested constituencies outside of the university? Specifically, to what extent is participation in these activities being encouraged – or even required – for a subset of faculty members, who then justifiably wonder how such activities will factor into their merit, tenure, and promotion decisions? Or, to what extent are these activities becoming the norm among some groups of faculty members more than others, for instance, more so among young scholars who engage in social media as a matter of course, and who need direction in how to balance these activities against those that meet the standard protocols for research, teaching, and service? These are the questions that motivate this report, with a particular focus on the

issue of evaluation criteria in promotion and tenure decisions, with obvious further application to merit decisions.

To this end, this report provides information and guidelines for four main audiences:

- (1) promotion and tenure committees,
- (2) candidates for tenure and promotion, especially junior faculty,
- (3) “new social media gatekeepers,” who regulate access to the most prestigious social media networks,
- (4) the discipline of sociology at large from which reviewers of tenure and promotion cases are drawn.

We next briefly outline our rationale for addressing our report to each of these groups and then close this section with an outline of the report.

(1) For *promotion and tenure committees*, we provide a set of considerations that could be included in deliberations over decisions for promotion and tenure (see especially section V), and by extension merit. These considerations will vary depending on the rank of the candidate, but our aim is to provide guidance for faculty at all stages of their careers. We emphasize at the outset that there is no substitute for the gold standard of evaluation: qualitative peer review by experts in the field of the candidate. Yet, at this point in time, some members of review committees will be more familiar with newer forms of public communication than will other members; consequently, it would be useful to have everyone starting from the same page. Even for those who are familiar with new forms of media, we can take steps toward standardizing the criteria employed to evaluate such activities.

(2) For *candidates up for tenure and promotion*, our objective is to fill at least part of the vacuum that now exists on the question of whether and how the subset of public communication involving social media activities is relevant in the tenure and promotion process. Our sense is that this is the category of activity that is least familiar to both internal and external reviewers in the basket of activities making up the tenure and promotion packet. While we do not want to mislead or distract junior faculty members in their pursuit of tenure, we also want to acknowledge and begin to formalize what many junior faculty members perceive to be the *advantages* of their social media activities for achieving the conventional milestones and credentials required for tenure.

(3) For the “*new social media gatekeepers*,” we aim to begin a conversation about equity in access to new networks of knowledge production that have the potential to reinforce existing inequalities even as they open up new opportunities for exercising voice and influence. On the one hand, faculty members from traditionally underrepresented groups can view the rise of new forms of public communication as an opportunity to disseminate ideas directly to the audiences who care about them, bypassing traditional gatekeepers (e.g., editors and reviewers of proprietary, peer-reviewed journals, university presses, etc.). On the other hand, it is easy to see how new technologies can reinstate existing hierarchies of status and visibility. Whose voices are most likely to be heard and

respected or shut down and denigrated? Which networks are most likely to be extolled or marginalized? In this report, we favor the use of standards to assess the “quality” of public engagement activities while at the same time exercising caution with respect to the exclusionary nature of such standards and recognizing the need to make access to such activities more equitable.

(4) For the *discipline of sociology* at large, our objective is more broadly educational in nature. Most faculty members will encounter the new media environment in one way or another, and in various capacities: as an external reviewer of a tenure or promotion case, as an instructor attempting to reach students in new ways, as a consumer of information disseminated through social media networks in your area of expertise, as a mentor to junior faculty members, as a member of a university body (e.g., a center) that is trying to promote the research of its faculty to a wider audience, or as some one who is supported by a funding agency that is seeking to publicize the findings of its grant recipients. Transparency and accountability are more than just buzzwords of the twenty-first-century university and state. They demand that the black box of research and teaching and tenure and promotion be opened up to greater scrutiny and often this means doing a better job of translating what we do to the public at large.

Before we delve into our thoughts on the ways in which social media and other forms of public communication might be evaluated, we begin with a more basic question: what is the value of public engagement in the digital age? Reactions to this new environment will be divided, perhaps to some degree along generational or administrative lines (e.g., administrators and PR folks may like it, researchers may not), and thus we want to acknowledge both the pros and cons of taking social media and public communication into greater account in merit, promotion, and tenure decisions. These comprise our next two sections (III and IV). In Section V, our core section, we provide some considerations along the lines mentioned above either for those who simply want to be better informed about these activities or for those who want to begin taking them more seriously in the evaluation process.

### **III. PROS: Benefits of Social Media and Public Communication**

Public engagement is beneficial in many ways: in advancing scholarly knowledge and methods through new forums of communication and exchange, in expanding the visibility and relevance of the discipline with the public at large and with influential elites (e.g., journalists, policymakers), in helping to set policy agendas, in providing a justification for public funding by states and federal granting agencies, and in democratizing notions of scholarly expertise. In all these ways, public engagement aligns with the public-serving mission of the profession, which we view as a key goal of the American Sociological Association.

In particular, social media is more accessible to many people than traditional academic publications. As a result, social scientists can use social media to “get the word out” about important research findings. In addition, social media can spread ideas to other social scientists leading to enhanced citations. Since tax dollars pay for higher education

(although at lower levels than in earlier periods), social media also provides a way to help share insights with the public.

In this section, we briefly consider the benefits of discussing and developing potential guidelines or standards for the public engagement of faculty members. We discuss these benefits in terms of their practical value in promoting the development of individual faculty careers as well their potential to be a force for positive change in creating greater equity and a greater sense of stewardship in the dissemination of scholarly knowledge.

**Promoting the development of faculty careers.** Although the significance and salience of public engagement for one's career may vary by rank, there are benefits that individual faculty members may experience at any rank. Consider the following list of beneficial outcomes for faculty engaging with the public, many of which are especially crucial to junior faculty members:

- Making professional network connections
- Sharing information with a wide audience
- Disseminating information in a timely manner
- Generating new ideas in virtual conversation with others
- Gaining feedback that improves research
- Increasing citation counts of published work
- Bypassing traditional gatekeepers
- Creating fresh materials for teaching

This is an incomplete list and one that focuses on individual rather than collective benefits. However, it provides a starting point for discussions about whether there ought to be standards for these and other kinds of activities that could or should be counted in the evaluation of faculty contributions.

**Promoting equity.** In reality, standards for evaluating public engagement are already being used (e.g., positive references to high profile media outlets covering a faculty member's research). Sometimes these standards are informal norms that unconsciously enter the evaluation process. They can lead to implicit biases based on ascribed characteristics such as gender and race that influence whether public engagement counts, and which kinds of public engagement count. Formal criteria for faculty public engagement, developed within individual departmental and institutional contexts, presumably will make for a fairer evaluation process by helping to mitigate the ways in which implicit biases lead us to differentially evaluate the records of higher and lower status groups within the discipline. At a minimum, discussion of a variety of standards and models for productive public engagement would serve to recognize the variety of ways that sociologists can be engaged. Otherwise, we risk conforming to a default perception that what is being done by high status actors (in resource-rich institutions) is the most valued form of engagement.

**Promoting responsible stewardship.** Sociologists should be engaged in responsible ways with various publics through various mediums and standards of evaluation can

promote such responsible stewardship. Public engagement can lead to amplification of work, but only the highest quality work should be promoted. Discussion of standards also needs to include the responsibilities of the sociological community to vet work and make sure to clarify when work reported beyond the academy is based on flawed methods, or when work may have a certain agenda by disclosing potential conflicts of interest (e.g., in research that has been funded with certain outcomes expected). For federally funded research, sociologists have a responsibility to acknowledge support as well, and to engage with publics in order to deliver promised broader impacts of the research. Having the discussion about standards and guidelines for engaged sociology will benefit faculty who are developing or reviewing external funding proposals.

#### **IV. CONS: Cautionary Notes**

In the previous section, we alluded to two key problems that can be reinforced or even exacerbated by the rise of new media: inequalities of status and influence and a reduction in the quality and standards of research. We add to this a third potential problem: an increase in the demands of an already overworked profession. Since these are all relatively obvious points and are discussed in other sections of this report, we make only a few observations about each of them here.

First, a principal concern that we have about inequality is the potential for minorities and women to be disproportionately exposed to exclusionary practices, negative and gossipy commentary, harassment, censure, and even loss of employment, as a result of their social media involvement or other professional activities. Departmental colleagues and university administrators will need to discuss and implement procedures that ensure the security and defend the intellectual freedom of faculty members who are vulnerable to these dynamics.

Second, we emphasize throughout this report the need to maintain conventional standards of quality and ethics in the conduct and dissemination of original research. Unfortunately, it is all too easy for topics of research to be selected for their media appeal rather than for their scholarly value; for data to be analyzed in simplistic and misleading ways in order to be packaged for popular consumption; and for originality to be sacrificed in the name of drawing attention from a public that is unaware of the prior literature. Clearly, these are not practices that any serious academic institution should condone.

Third, we have serious concerns about adding another demand on our time, particularly if it distracts from our conventional responsibilities to conduct research, teach, and serve our profession. As we all know, valuable time can be squandered online, and as noted above, negative and unproductive lines of communication can develop (e.g., regarding the job market or teacher evaluations). Thus caution needs to be exercised in advocating for an increase in the public engagement of faculty members; only that which clearly supports and enhances research, teaching, service, professional development, and stewardship to the public should be embraced.

## V. Evaluation Criteria

Given that social media and other communicative activities absorb the time of sociologists, the committee considered the question of how these contributions might be considered for tenure and promotion as well as merit.

Advocating for greater visibility of public engagement recognizes that: (1) public engagement—connecting scholarship to public debates and usages—is an essential component of scholarly excellence, of the university’s obligation to society at large, and of showcasing the public uses of Sociology; (2) in spite of its relevance to most of the pressing social issues of our time, sociological research remains vastly underutilized in our current public debates, public policy and practice; (3) the skill-sets and the networks scholars need to participate in effective public engagement—including diverse forms of public communication—are not part of the typical training or normal career trajectory in the discipline. Any sociologist seeking to succeed in public engagement must not only acquire new skills and networks, but also master new rules of the game in the fields she or he is crossing over into: e.g. politics, media, advocacy, education, healthcare, etc.

The task at hand is to discern criteria for evaluating public engagement that incorporate traditional disciplinary criteria for valuable and responsible scholarship, *and* recognize the criteria that operate within the rules of the game of the fields scholars are entering. We offer three broad sets of criteria that can be used in combination to evaluate the contributions of individuals engaging in public communication of various forms. Put differently, not all social media contributions are the same. Here are some ways to consider the contributions the pieces make:

**A first criterion** in the evaluation process might distinguish between pieces based on **type of content**:

- a) A public communication about original research the author(s) conducted
- b) A synthesis/review of a particular field/body of sociological literature
- c) A piece of in-depth, explanatory journalism (staple of *The Conversation*)
- d) An opinion piece/blog that speculates/theorizes about a social phenomenon
- e) A use/application of sociological research in practice, law, policymaking (e.g. educational or clinical tool, amicus brief, policy brief, etc.)

One might evaluate more highly communications based on original scholarship; however, within the public domain, there is often just as a great a value in disseminating others’ research as there is in communicating about one’s own, and hence the key issue may not be originality, but rather accurate representation and application of research. Likewise, following scholarly conventions one might evaluate a pure opinion piece as of lesser value than an article based on original research or a synthesis. But public speculation, using a sociological perspective, may be quite important to advance new ideas and stimulate new conversations. Moreover, the latter two categories may require the mastery of new skills and bodies of knowledge (for instance in applying sociology to the

medical field). *A criterion for evaluation might therefore be simply the extent to which the public communication is well grounded in sociological research and theory.*

**A second, related criterion is rigor/quality.** Rigor may be assessed using disciplinary standards, including the sociological peer-review system. One criterion for rigor is, as noted above, the degree to which a given public engagement is based in peer-reviewed scholarly publications. A second measure for rigor would be to ask whether a given form of public communication passes through a peer-review-like process in a curated blog or an allied profession such as journalism. For instance, to be published in outlets such as the *New York Times*, the *Nation*, *The Conversation*, etc. a piece must be vetted by an editor and most likely several editors. However, many high-profile new media publications do not apply the same vetting system (e.g. the *Huffington Post*). And many excellent examples of public communication do not pass through an institutionalized pre-publication peer review at all. These may include self-published blogs, power point presentations, and policy briefs.

Generally speaking, a high quality piece of public communication – whether or not it passes through some kind of review process – must simultaneously meet the criteria for rigor within the discipline *and* meet additional criteria within a given field. Those criteria involve, first, learning and then playing by the rules of a different game.<sup>1</sup> A scholar must use the *format* for communication that has currency in a given field (800 word argument, power point presentations, executive summary, one-page policy brief, etc.); the *time frame* for acceptable data and product delivery (e.g., in journalism and health care, statistics more than three years olds may be deemed outdated); and the expected *frames of reference* (effective policy briefs must reference the appropriate constituencies; media contributions must be in tune with current events, etc.). A high-quality public communication demonstrates deep knowledge of the required format, needs, and frames of reference of the audiences it seeks to reach. *A criterion for quality is thus mastery of such rules of the game—including the terminology, technology, or required interdisciplinary bodies of knowledge—needed to communicate effectively.*

Two examples of rules of the game, which cut across different public domains, deserve attention because they depart in significant ways from criteria used to determine sociological rigor. Effective public communications almost always require authors to develop new writing skills. They must usually omit, or effectively translate, the standard components of disciplinary publications—including theoretical concepts, disciplinary debates, or calls for future research. Instead, prose must be clear, concise, and to the point. Writing that is both accessible and analytically complex requires considerable skill. Acquiring such skills (which, of course, advance academic writing as well) takes time. The criterion for excellence then might be the demonstration of having mastered these skills.

Second, effective public communications generally require authors to discuss—and indeed foreground—practical or policy implications, or a particular perspective. Depending on the field, those implications might be formulated dispassionately (policy),

---

<sup>1</sup> Badgett, M.V. Lee. 2016. *The Public Professor*. New York: NY Press.



or more passionately (new media, advocacy), or even polemically. While the tone will vary according to the conventions of the field and expectations of the audience, the key issue is whether a piece is informed, in the sense that the author has taken a stand on a particular issue, or laid out key questions to think about, based on an empirically based argument (recognizing of course that in our discipline we have methodological pluralism). *A criterion for excellence might therefore be the extent to which authors succeed in advancing practical/policy implications/perspectives grounded in sociological research.*

**A final set of criteria pertain to the public impact.** The impact of any public engagement by scholars, particularly in the policy realm, is often difficult to establish.<sup>2</sup> There are indirect indicators of impact. For public communications, published through the traditional or new media, the number of viewers is for instance one measure of impact. However, this measure will tend to prioritize high-profile publications, such as the *New York Times*, while publishing in smaller venues, such as a leading state newspaper, or a publication aimed at audiences and issues often excluded from mainstream publications, may have an equal or more significant impact on the public discourse. For instance, women and minorities are underrepresented in op-eds published by major U.S outlets.<sup>3</sup> *Keeping in mind these caveats, criteria for impact may include number of viewers and postings on the new media—number of republications, tweets, Facebook likes, etc.—which do indicate the reach of a piece.*

*A second way to measure impact is through testimonies by actors and populations who are directly impacted by a scholar's public engagement and public communication. (One could even consider these testimonies as a form of post-publication peer review.)* A scholar going up for tenure and promotion, or for promotion to full professor, could solicit letters from the relevant parties to be placed in her or his file for consideration. Examples of such letter writers include policy makers, non-profit policy analysis, union leaders, community groups, advocacy groups, or members of the general public stating the impact of a scholar's research on professional work, policy change, or quality of life. Such letters writers could be well positioned to explain how and why a scholar's research has been critical to success in a field that that academic reviewers might not understand. A healthcare specialist could attest to changes in clinical practices as a result of sociological research, a grassroots organizer could speak about impact on organizing, and so on.

*A third way to measure impact is to point to instances where public engagement and public communication has contributed to policy change—either the national, state, or local level—change of practices—among educators or medical professionals—or has opened up/reset the terms for public debate in significant ways.* Generally speaking, social change, of course, occurs due to multiple factors, and it may not be possible to isolate the contribution of one scholar's research. However, there are certainly instances where a particular congressional testimony, publication, or set of public presentations

---

<sup>2</sup> K. Prewitt, T.A. Schwandt, and M.L. Straf, eds. 2012. *Using Science as Evidence in Public Policy*. Committee on the Use of Social Science Knowledge in Public Policy, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, National Research Council. Washington, DC: The National Academies.

<sup>3</sup> Oped Project

impact actors, policies, and debate outside the academy. Ideally, a letter writer would be able to provide testimony to such change (see above). But it may also be necessary for the scholar to explain how research has impacted policy and practice (for instance, by tracing how a policy critique was followed by a concomitant policy change, or by pointing to the ripple effect of one provocative op-ed across diverse media outlets).

In short, when we assess public engagement, we may use a variety of criteria, including (1) the type of content, (2) the rigor and quality of the communication, as determined by disciplinary standards and by the standards of the “receiving” audiences, and, (3) the impact of the engagement. Assessment must balance “in-house” criteria familiar to review committees, and criteria that may require the assistance of extra-disciplinary reviewers, and even the candidates who are up for review.

**Illustrations from existing institutions.** Some universities have already moved to incorporate mention of *public engagement* in their promotion and tenure dossier expectations. One example is the University of Minnesota, which suggests “public outreach” as a subcategory for entries in several sections on their “master curriculum vitae” document, provided on their website. These sections include honors and awards for public engagement, websites (within the research and publication category and candidates must provide details on their level of involvement), and service (including public outreach). The inclusion of public engagement is commendable, though we note that UMN only explicitly names websites as a suggested form of public engagement; the other sections leave the interpretation of the terms up to the candidate to delineate. That is, it is unclear from UMN’s dossier document whether other digital forms of public engagement, such as guest blogging, would be admissible.

Another institution that already includes public engagement in its tenure and promotion materials is Virginia Tech. Section VI of its dossier template, entitled “International and Professional Service and Additional Outreach and Extension Activities,” includes a subsection that suggests candidates list item such as “Outreach and extension publications, including trade journals, newsletters, websites, journals, multimedia items, etc.” Once again, this document does not delineate specific items beyond websites, though the umbrella term “multimedia items” seems to invite other types of digital public engagement.

In sum, these institutions, along with a growing number of others, are already including public engagement as a valued part of a candidate’s promotion and tenure case. These examples can serve as a model for other institutions that wish to reward scholarly public engagement.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Departments traditionally consider tenure cases on the basis of three categories: research, teaching and service. Yet, public engagement comes in many cross-cutting forms, including conventional types of public communication, digital scholarship, and social media outreach, as scholars communicate about their research or teaching with a broader

audience. Sociologists engaging in public communication may struggle to appropriately highlight these types of contributions—which in some cases have substantial importance in their field—within the standard three categories for tenure. Departments may set their own priorities within these traditional parameters. Our suggestion is that departments consider a) adding a fourth category, *public engagement*, where scholars can emphasize their contributions in this realm; or b) recognizing and rewarding public engagement within the three categories.