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## **There's Research on That: Translating and Sharing Sociology for Public Audiences**

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*This article draws a decade of experience editing and publishing [TheSocietyPages.org](#), and four more years editing *Contexts* magazine. Both projects work to bring sociological research and insight to broader public audiences, visibility, and impact. Here we build upon Herbert Gans' original call for public sociology and his emphasis on the translation and dissemination of sociological research, insight, and context on social issues and problems for broad public audiences. We begin by detailing the general challenges of such communication-oriented public outreach and engagement. We then use our work with *The Society Pages*, one of the largest sociological hubs on the internet, as a case study for doing this work and addressing these challenges. Key points of emphasis include: (1) the core challenges and key principles of writing for general, nonacademic audiences; (2) organizational and infrastructure-related needs and some pragmatic recommendations for institutionalizing publicly engaged sociology; and (3) the critical role of graduate students in these endeavors. We conclude that sociologists ourselves are best positioned to share our work with public audiences and we identify some benefits for the discipline in doing such engaged scholarship over a sustained period.*

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**KEYWORDS:** audiences; contexts; institutions; public sociology; publishing; *The Society Pages*.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In many respects, the story of twenty-first-century sociology, in the United States and all around the world, is being told by a dynamic new wave of public scholars, each committed to bringing sociological research and perspectives to broader societal influence and visibility. This public sociology movement, famously championed by Burawoy (2005, and by Gans 1989), has been broad and multifaceted. It has included fact-based, normal-science dimensions as well as more critical, interpretive orientations; it has spanned the political spectrum and the diverse ways in which sociologists attempt to do social commentary, advocacy, intervention, and change; and it has operated in and through a spectrum of technologies and formats. The last decade has been particularly vibrant with major developments in policy and applied areas, community-engaged research, and new courses and pedagogy at both the graduate and undergraduate levels (see, e.g., Hossfeld et al. 2022). Taken as a

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whole, we believe the combined effects of these modes, media, and methods of public engagement are helping sociology reinvent and revitalize itself for a world that needs sociology more than ever (Hartmann 2017).

One area that has been largely missing from (or at least somewhat muted within) the large recent literature and reflection on public sociology concerns the media—more specifically, institutional projects designed to bring sociological research, knowledge, and insight to broader public audiences via promotion and dissemination through various media and mass media formats. This is not to suggest that sociologists are not operating in this space. To the contrary, the field now has prominent sociologists with regular columns in national publications such as *The New York Times* and *The Atlantic*, our research is now featured regularly in newer media initiatives such as *Vox* or *The Conversation*, and boasts numerous popular trade press books, including a recent Pulitzer Prize winner. Many sociologists blog and post with candor and authority to their respective online audiences, write for print media and consult with reporters at all levels, and are in the core of policy and advocacy initiatives like the Scholar's Strategy Network (Skocpol 2014). Nevertheless, this aspect of public sociology has not been the focus of as much disciplinary commentary or theorizing as others. To give just one example: only two of the 25 chapters—one of the eight full sections of the volume—of the new Routledge reader on public sociology are focused on communication or what they call “knowledge sharing.”

The absence of disciplinary attention to such communication- and dissemination-oriented projects, programming, and commitments in the public sociology space is noteworthy and perhaps ironic. Not only has the discipline gained great media visibility and access in recent years, but such visibility and access were a primary emphasis of much early writing on public sociology. Publicly accessible research and writing, as well as journalistic forays, interactions, and partnerships with media, were at the forefront of Herbert Gans' thinking when he originally introduced the notion of “public sociology” into our lexicon with his 1989 American Sociological Association presidential address. The need to work with and through journalists, traditional news organizations, and mass media outlets was one of Gans' points of emphasis and arguably his primary vision and intended intervention.

In this article, we hope to help reanimate the importance of this dimension of public sociology within contemporary understandings of the enterprise and its broader social and disciplinary significance. More generally, we aim to capture and convey some of the institutional challenges that can make this work both so difficult and so easy to overlook. To accomplish these tasks, we describe our own experiences in working on *the Society Pages* (and *Contexts* before that), one of the largest platforms for online sociology in the United States (if not internationally), as a mini-case study from which to reflect on the challenges and benefits of translating and promoting sociological research, knowledge, and insight to broad public audiences.

Based in the Department of Sociology at the University of Minnesota, a department with a long history and established reputation for publicly engaged sociology (Aminzade 2004; Uggen 2005), “The Society Pages”—or, TSP as we often call it—is an open-access sociology hub created when Hartmann and Uggen were transitioning

out of their editorship of *Contexts* magazine over a decade ago. Originally envisioned as an online platform for the print magazine, we quickly realized the broader potential and audiences for sociology that existed on the internet, and the need to provide infrastructure and support to other sociological bloggers and commentators all over the field. Maintained and expanded over the years, the site and its Twitter and Facebook feeds now reach thousands of daily readers. Core online content includes blog posts from various partner sites—which include [Contexts.org](http://Contexts.org), Sociological Images, the Council on Contemporary Families, and Engaging Sports to name a few—as well as original content produced in Minnesota and beyond. In contrast to bloggers and writers who focus on op-eds, cultural commentaries, and political analysis, TSP tries mainly to synthesize and promote basic empirical research, core sociological insights, and the broader social contexts behind the current news. The large TSP social media networks and outlets not only repackage and circulate our own TSP content, but they also provide links to all manner of sociological content on the internet and in the mass media.

In the sections that follow, we will draw upon our experiences in editing and publishing The Society Pages in working to bring sociological research and insight to broader public audiences, visibility, and impact. We will begin by detailing the general challenges of such public outreach and engagement. We then use our work with TSP as a kind of case study for doing this work and addressing these challenges. Key points of emphasis include: (1) the challenges of writing for and communicating with general public audiences, including some of our core TSP principles for engagement; (2) the resource and infrastructure needs of institutionalization; and (3) the essential role of graduate students in producing and curating content. Our focus is the concrete challenges and problem-solving opportunities that come with producing sociology for general, public audiences. We write in hopes that this framework will be helpful for others building the teams and resources needed to sustain ongoing communication-oriented public sociology projects.

## THE CHALLENGES OF BRINGING SOCIOLOGY TO PUBLIC AUDIENCES

The core challenge and grand goal of The Society Pages are to fill the gap between public knowledge of sociology (which is typically quite limited and often misguided) and both basic and state-of-the-art sociological research, theory, and perspective. At the heart of this challenge, and perhaps the crux of all sociological outreach and engagement with general public audiences, is communication—how best to translate, publicize, and promote sociological research and knowledge to nonacademic audiences for whom this information and insight can be most useful and valuable. Multiple features of the website are designed with this goal in mind. For example, our “Discoveries” section (which parallels similar efforts by *Contexts* over the years) is about identifying and publicizing the new research and scholarship in the field that has particular public interest or policy relevance. For example, we recently covered new work on sexual harassment in the military, family wealth and child development, and school expulsion. Our “There’s Research on That” features—TROT, for short—are brief, accessible summaries of the state of sociological

knowledge and insight on current events and key issues, such as what we know about police violence, adolescent suicide, or the challenges of motherhood. We also help to spread the word on sociology via social media, amplifying sociologists in the news, sharing newly relevant material from the extensive TSP archive, and sharing a weekly digest newsletter with readers who want to stay in touch with us.

Writing is often the first thing that comes to mind when publicly minded sociologists think about communication and public engagement (cf. Stein and Daniels 2017), and the written word is at the center of all of these aspects of TSP. With the advent of social media and new multimedia formats and platforms, however, we daresay that the technologies for communicating sociology to public audiences are well beyond anything Gans or others could have imagined just decades ago (Carrigan and Fatsis 2021; Daniels and Thistlethwaite 2016). Our website, for example, and the pages of our partner sites, make heavy use of images, videos, and graphics, emphasizing layout and design generally, podcasts (“Give Methods a Chance” and most recently “Give Theory a Chance”), video clips, and various combinations thereof. Nevertheless, writing is a good place to specify and begin to explicate the challenges of reaching broader, nonacademic audiences.

When Uggen and Hartmann edited *Contexts*, we thought about writing a great deal, going so far as to characterize it as the “first method” of all social scientific research. We put a lot of energy and emphasis on cultivating good sociological writers and writing, and made that a point of emphasis and pride at The Society Pages from the beginning. We also learned that writing for public audiences was not as easy for sociologists or sociology as we might have imagined or hoped.

The difficulty with writing sociology for public audiences is not that sociologists are inherently bad writers; rather, the core problem is that so much sociological writing is oriented to academic publications and specialist audiences. Thus, our usual habits and language are given over to technical details, dense theorization and terminology, and critical viewpoints. There are substantive obstacles as well. For example, our research often attends to public problems and social inequalities, and our findings and insights are often critical—which chafes against a culture that often wants upbeat, optimistic stories of resilient and successful individuals. Many sociologists are also less oriented toward telling engaging stories and drawing out the basic implications of their work than with providing data and analysis that are technical, detailed, and complex—as we know the social world to be. As more than one journalist told us, sociologists are the punch line in an old newsroom joke. We all provide the same “pull quote” no matter what the topic or question: “it is actually more complicated than that.” We are not wrong about these complexities, of course, but journalists and readers want to know the take-home message of our work.

In certain regards, then, journalists are better at writing for public audiences than we sociologists tend to be. They know what their audiences are looking for and are trained to write for them. They are skilled at translating big, complicated ideas into punchy, accessible, and engaging sentences and paragraphs. They know how to tell good stories and bring otherwise dry data and statistics to life, and they are often able to do all this in a quick and timely fashion. As Ragin once sketched in a book on methodology (1994), some of the best investigative and long-form reporters share a good deal in common with sociologists when it comes to tracking down details,

grounding issues and ideas in empirical, real-world experiences, and bringing this all to life for readers. These are just some of the journalistic skills that Herbert Gans called out in suggesting that sociologists needed to build connections with media organizations and other publicly oriented communicators.<sup>4</sup>

Yet working with or through professional writers and reporters is hardly the panacea it may seem. One of the ideas Hartmann and Uggen had when first taking over the editorship of *Contexts* was to provide small stipends to recruit freelance journalists to write about sociology, sociologists, and publicly relevant sociological research findings and insights. Our idea was that it would be easier to teach a little sociology to journalists than to teach sociologists to write like journalists. This approach proved far more difficult and time-consuming than we imagined. It turned out that while journalists and freelance writers could write great profiles and exciting, engaging introductions, they often did not think sociologically enough to bring out the contributions that sociologists were uniquely capable of and positioned to make.

Social issues are, frankly, often more complicated than regular folks or journalists or even policymakers think. Causal mechanisms are often unseen or multifaceted, social meanings can be multi-layered and contradictory, and certain groups are marginalized, missed, or excluded entirely. Key interests, institutions, and resources often remain unseen in the background, as can the broader social forces or historical context needed to really understand any given issue, phenomenon, person, or event. Sociology, it turns out, really does provide a unique way of approaching and imagining the world and this was not obvious or intuitive for the otherwise skilled writers we had commissioned. We and our little editorial team had to do that for them, and eventually it proved both easier and better to work with motivated sociologists and sociologists-in-training; they already knew about the field and they had often done the research themselves.

This is, perhaps, the core lesson or claim that we have tried to operationalize and live into at The Society Pages. Not all sociologists do this well, and not all sociological research and theorizing will be relevant for a public audience or audiences. And not everyone appreciates our editorial insights and suggestions. (Often, as we learned, it is the most established, senior scholars who are least receptive.) But by and large, it is sociologists ourselves who best understand our work and its broader public significance, and are thus best able to present, prepare, translate, and disseminate it to the world. And we just try to help that process along, based on the following three general principles.

1. *Sociology is not the news*: One of the biggest pressures that anyone working on an open-access website can experience is the felt need to keep up with superfast news cycles that mark our current culture and media environment. What are the latest trends, hottest topics, or the biggest new scandals? We believe it is essential to resist this temptation and, more fundamentally, to realize that sociology is not the

<sup>4</sup> Gans, it should be noted, was not only focused on journalists. He also encouraged sociologists themselves to do a better job writing for and communicating directly with the public. One example of this was his interest in sociological books that became popular best sellers (Gans 1997), a project the members of our *Contexts*/TSP team updated in 2010 (Longhofer et al. 2010).

news. What sociologists are far better positioned and prepared to do is to take a step or two back from any issue, problem, or event (and how it is being covered) and figure out what else sociology may contribute to enhance or expand the initial media reporting and public dialogue. While we are poorly equipped to cover an emerging public health crisis or school shooting in the same way as *CNN* or the *New York Times*, we can and do have valuable research-based insights to share drawn from studies of prior public health crises and mass shooting events.

As much as our project might be thought of as journalistic, sociological communication is not journalism. Journalism breaks new stories (that is why it is called “the news”) and provides timely, ongoing coverage of immediate, on-the-ground developments. Journalists, by necessity, do their writing and dissemination quickly, and must cut to the most immediate core and basic facts of what is happening in the world. Sociology does different things (notwithstanding Gans’ call for early “fire-house” commentary on the news, 1989:6). Sociology, in contrast, takes a longer-term, big picture and often critical approach. We document origins and provide historical context; we do in-depth analysis of mechanisms and causes; we delve into implications and broader cultural significance. Put differently, sociologists cannot and should not try to do what journalists do on a daily basis. Frankly, we do not have the resources or the skills to do so. We can and should do something different. And that is to provide broader context, deeper understandings, proper comparative cases, and research, all carefully analyzed and interpreted. And to do this properly, one of the ongoing priorities is to keep up with the field and all its subareas, and then to distill out the key insights and findings, those most interesting to and directly relevant for public audiences and their understanding of contemporary issues and social problems.

2. *Keep the focus on the research:* One of the core principles and guidelines for *The Society Pages* is to keep the focus on the research—that is, the established, empirically grounded knowledge, information, and insight sociologist have produced about people, problems, events, and all aspects of social life. This may sound relatively simple and straightforward, but it bears explicit comment and explanation.

A great deal of public sociology is focused on activism and advocacy, struggles for justice and equity, policy formation, and social change (Cf. Badgett 2015). We do not oppose any of the usual advocacy and engagement goals of public sociology, and in fact, we each do a good deal of such work in our own research, outreach, and scholarship. However, when it comes to TSP our focus is on identifying, synthesizing, distilling, and promoting what is well-known and accepted across the field. Some of the research we focus on is relatively new, cutting-edge data or analysis. But more often it is research and knowledge that is rather well-established within the field, or even basic sociological orientation and perspective. To wit: often when our graduate student board is writing up new research and journal articles for the field, we find ourselves highlighting not the new findings or subtle nuances of fresh new work but the broader, basic starting points—the sociological taken-for-granted’s—upon which it is based. Here, it is worth noting that this article takes its title from our popular “There’s Research on That!” column. This feature is not based upon emerging

new sociological scholarship but rather highlights a solid line of existing, sometimes classic sociological research. Too often, such research is missing from initial reporting on and public discussion of current events and hot topics in the media.

There are several reasons for the emphasis on research. One is our almost quaint, old-fashioned understanding of social science and ongoing commitment to knowledge, information, and evidence. Simply put, we think basic knowledge and information about social life is an important part of any public dialogue or debate, piece of legislation, or conversation about our collective lives. Sociology has a great deal to contribute on this front, especially in democratic settings. Another is about the need to establish and maintain trust, credibility, and legitimacy of sociological knowledge and insight itself. Sociology does not just speculate about the realities of others or the worlds around us, nor offer ungrounded opinions or claims; rather, its claims to truth and significance are based on empirical evidence and engagement with concrete empirical facts and social realities.

A few summers back we enlisted a group of researchers at Minnesota to do a “usability study” of our website. Among other things, we invited randomly selected individual instructors and students to come into a lab and interact with our site and its various features and materials. Our team sat on the other side of a one-way mirror watching and listening to their actions and thoughts. The lab boasted eye-tracking software that some of us could not get enough of. In any case, one of the things that we learned, especially from students who were in the study, is how they tried to quickly distinguish “credible” sources from noncredible ones. And one key marker of credibility and authority for them when it came to websites (not to mention libraries, think tanks, advocacy organizations, and individual scholars) was a grounding in research and empirical evidence. There is a lot that could be said about this, but at the very least it is that research is at the foundation of whatever insight and information we can contribute to public audiences and discourse. Extending from this, when sociologists participate in public debates and decision-making as sociologists (rather than as nonexpert citizens) it is not just effective but incumbent to proceed from and focus on research, data, and knowledge. Anything else may undermine the credibility and authority of sociology and social science.

3. *Know your audience(s)*: In addition to keeping abreast of both timely and classic sociological research and theory, it is essential that sociologists who want to bring sociology to broader public awareness and influence stay attuned to the interests, ideas, and needs of their audiences and constituencies—both what they think about and how they think, talk, and process it. This includes not only specific social groups and populations but also policymakers, pundits and social influencers, and the media itself. Not all sociology will garner interest from the general public, of course, if only because some of what we write is geared to a small audience of technical experts. But much if not most of what we do engages social questions of general interest, bringing theory and evidence to bear on subjects such as racial discrimination and segregation, gender and sexuality, poverty and inequality, and health and well-being. Our job is to identify which of this knowledge and information is most relevant, meaningful, and important for various nonacademic audiences and then figure out how to package and promote this work accordingly.

A great deal of the current literature on public sociology is about the dialogue, the interface, the two-way street, between researchers and the nonacademic peoples and communities with whom they engage (see, again, Hossfeld et al. 2022). This is no less true for sociologists committed to bringing our knowledge and understanding out into the world. However, the nature of the academic/nonacademic relationship for those of us engaged in communication and dissemination is not the coproduction of knowledge as is typically the case for public sociology. Rather, it is about figuring out what communities know or do not know, and what they need to know—and to be responsive and in dialogue with these concerns. In some cases and for some communities, this is easy and straightforward and the gaps in knowledge are clear. But it is often considerably more complicated, as we must identify people who have been left out, or underlying mechanisms that have yet to be clearly identified. We might need to expose unknown or unintended consequences, or inject some important social context or historical perspective into a contemporary debate. For example, Brent Staples of the *New York Times* skillfully situated current voting rights debates within sociological research on the racist history of disenfranchisement for people with criminal convictions (Staples 2014). These sociological insights and points of emphasis do not always speak for themselves and are not always appreciated by the communities and populations that may need them most. Indeed, one aspect of knowing one's audience is understanding what kinds of content and topics hold their current interest as well as those that they might need but may not know much about. The trick here is to find a balance of topics—and framings—that intuitively or organically capture any particular group's attention, especially in terms of introducing topics and content that may not immediately capture their interest but are important for them to learn about.

Finally, a word on the question of the audience itself—or really “audiences,” in the plural. There is a tendency, in sociology and social theory more generally, going back at least to the foundational formulations of Dewey (1954), to talk about the public as a singular, monolithic phenomenon, force, or group. In general terms, this orientation and framing is problematic, as scholars from various feminist, race-critical, and intersectional perspectives have pointed out. Whatever else it might be, “the public” is never composed of a single, homogeneous group but rather of multiple groups and individuals with multiple interests, backgrounds, and perspectives. In this context, it is worth noting that even though we generally imagine ourselves to be writing for and communicating with a very broad, generally educated public audience on TSP, the reality is that our readership is skewed toward academic audiences—the “.edu crowd,” as it were. At various times we have developed content (such as teaching tools or sample TSP syllabii collections) designed to appeal to these specific readers, as students, high school instructors, scholars from other disciplines, and sociologists themselves. Most often, however, our target audience remains the grand, undifferentiated public. While we know this to be something of a fiction—or “aspiration,” as we tend to think of it—this helps us make content and framing choices using a broad, general lens that allows sociology to be translatable and meaningful to a broad range of nonspecialist readers and consumers. In short, writing to this aspirational general public allows and forces us to be attentive to sociological

material of broad interest and significance and to frame this material in ways that are genuinely accessible and engaging for nonacademic, nonspecialist readers.

## INSTITUTIONALIZING ENGAGEMENT: BACKSTAGE AT THE SOCIETY PAGES

Summarizing, synthesizing, framing, and packaging sociological knowledge and insight for public audiences is one thing; building an organization and operating model to distribute this content in a regular, systematic fashion is quite another. We refer, here, to the problem of institutionalization. That is, how rank and file sociologists can secure the resources and create the structures needed to do the work of translation and public dissemination on a regular, ongoing, long-lasting basis. As much as we have learned about the translation and promotion of sociological content, one of our greatest challenges and (ever-tenuous) accomplishments with The Society Pages has been to cultivate an institutional model and organizational infrastructure to launch, support, and sustain this open-access website. It is a model necessarily defined by being entrepreneurial, voluntaristic, and collaborative—essential qualities for almost any kind of public outreach and sociological engagement.

### *Origins, Infrastructure, and Funding*

The TSP project, as discussed, grew out of our time as editors of *Contexts* magazine, the American Sociological Association publication designed to bring sociology to broader public visibility and influence. Without minimizing the difficulties of securing the editorship and doing the regular week-to-week work of putting out a glossy, quarterly magazine, there are great advantages to the association-based funding model. The resources and editorial support that came with editing an ASA journal eliminated many of the burdens of institutionalization and internal organizational staffing. Further, the status and visibility of working on an up-and-coming national publication made it relatively easy to recruit authors, reviewers, and graduate students to contribute content and to work on the project in other supporting roles. Launching The Society Pages.org as a stand-alone, independent venture was, however, a significantly more complicated venture.

Our initial launch of TSP was actually predicated on continuing to work with *Contexts* editors and ASA administrators. After Hartmann and Uggen's time as editors was concluded, our Minnesota team continued to promote, repost, and recirculate *Contexts* content online and maintain the [Contexts.org](http://Contexts.org) website. This arrangement helped pay for tech support and the server space needed to operate an open-access, multi-sited website like TSP, and we have continued to host *Contexts* through four editorial transitions. Nevertheless, this long-term mutually beneficial partnership has never been sufficient to fund and sustain the TSP site on its own.

Although TSP expenses aren't huge, they are also not trivial. Our home institution, the University of Minnesota College of Liberal Arts, provides an office and a small amount of teaching relief (one-half course per year for Hartmann and Uggen). More importantly, the faculty, staff, and especially graduate students (more on them

below) of our sociology department have supported and regularly contributed to the TSP project over the years. Nevertheless, the website, social media and enterprise, as we have conceived and come to run it, requires some staff, if only to organize, coordinate, and support the work of the editors and our volunteer graduate students as well as to coordinate with our various partner pages and community bloggers. It also requires server space for hosting our many pages and features and ongoing technical support for trouble-shooting, updating, and regular maintenance. TSP currently employs two part-time staff members, an advanced graduate student editor and a web editor, and contracts with other specialists to help with accounting, taxes, and special projects. Where and how do we fund and support TSP as an open-access, not-for-profit venture? This is the fundamental “revenue question”—and it is one that confronts not only TSP but almost any publicly oriented sociological project.

There has never been a paywall, password, or “premium content” on [TheSocietyPages.org](https://www.sociologypages.org). As a public writing project, we have fought to keep everything we produce freely accessible. This limits our revenues and perhaps our growth, since it means we must run leaner as an organization. It would be nice to “staff up” and relieve our small team of certain editorial and managerial responsibilities, but when we explore other revenue streams, the costs often outweigh the benefits. For example, the entities who would pay the most to advertise on our site are attracted to our high rate of traffic on stories about subjects such as criminal record checks or adolescent sexuality. Neither our authors nor our readers would appreciate seeing their ads on TSP. We have also explored “membership” models, voluntary donation schemes, and promotional content, but none of these seemed right for us. The “pledge drive” model works best, we learned, when there is some imminent threat to the programming that users value, such as a favorite public radio program. Threatening to close up shop seems disingenuous and unsustainable as a long-term strategy. To some extent, the “promoted content” model also relies on deception, which could similarly undermine the trust we have painstakingly built with readers. We would be uncomfortable presenting paid advertising material alongside the regular material vetted by our editorial board unless it was clearly labeled as such and appropriate for our site in the first place. Early on, we also spent time pursuing various opportunities with funders and foundations. Even when our applications were successful, these could only provide short-term stopgap funding rather than sustainable infrastructure.

### *Institutional Partnerships*

As Rob Smith (2022) points out in his recent Eastern Sociological Society presidential address, the quality of relationships with external partners often determines the long-term success and viability of publicly engaged sociology efforts. Whether social science research is actually used by policymakers, for example, depends at least as much on the quality of relationships as on the quality of research (Gamoran 2018). Along these lines, Uggen (2023) details the core trust and mutual respect behind his two-decade partnership with The Sentencing Project, a justice advocacy organization that has helped restore the vote to millions of people with criminal records. In that partnership, the research team contributes scholarly

expertise, data, analysis, and writing. The advocacy organization contributes insight and vision, as well as design, layout, and infographics preparation, plus messaging, organizing, and dissemination to their far-reaching networks via targeted press conferences and webinars. One lesson we take from this experience is that public-facing academics must sometimes be a bit humbler about our own expertise and a bit more ambitious about the collective goals we can accomplish with well-matched institutional partners.

At The Society Pages, we rely heavily on trusted institutional partners. We realized all too quickly that we knew next to nothing about marketing our site, assuming rather naively that if we built it the audience would come. Nor did we have a great plan for paying the bills. Our ever-evolving “solution” to the institutional challenges of funding and supporting an operation like TSP over the years has involved a series of creative, entrepreneurial partnerships with various like-minded organizations, initiatives, and programs. The first of these was with the publishing house W.W. Norton, a press that occupies a prominent place in the Introduction to Sociology textbook market and with whom Hartmann and Uggen had created the second edition of the Contexts Reader during their editorship. In transitioning to an expanded, multifaceted open-access website and launching TSP, we entered into a creative publishing partnership with Norton wherein we produced a series of small edited books, which contained short, timely collections of articles (typically less than 2,500 words) on subjects like crime, race, politics, and gender. For Norton, this collaboration not only produced books that could be marketed for course use and teaching purposes, but it also served as advertising for their textbooks and a calling card for recruiting new authors and contributors to their lists. For us, these volumes drew readers to the site and our authors received small royalty checks (known locally as “burrito money,” assuming one does not add the guacamole). Beyond the mostly symbolic payments, our authors (especially graduate students and junior faculty) liked the idea of having their work immediately available on TSP and also published as an article in an edited volume they can put on their shelf or submit in a tenure file.

The TSP collaboration with Norton had a very successful four-year run and yielded, among other things, a six-volume book series and a book version of the popular “Given Methods a Chance” podcast series by TSP alums Kyle Green and Sarah Lageson. And while this arrangement was not permanent, it also provided the blueprint and strategy for securing ongoing resources and support for the site. The importance of finding mutually beneficial and like-minded institutional partnerships is often underemphasized in public sociology discussions. At The Society Pages, this means collaborating with journalists and policy shops, as well as universities and more traditional academic publishers.

Over the past decade, we have proposed and created a series of partnerships and collaborations with various public advocacy and online projects with a sociology focus or bent. This has included the Scholars Strategy Network, the Council on Contemporary Families, the Midwest Sociological Society, the University of Minnesota College of Liberal Arts, and (most recently) the Berkeley Journal of Sociology. At different points, we have helped build or refresh websites for these organizations and projects, developed social media strategies, or simply helped promote their content to new and broader audiences. As we have used our knowledge and experience

to help these groups build and sustain their own content, brands, and platforms, these various projects and collaborations have provided us with sufficient resources to maintain our core TSP website and operations. That said, and as our accountant is quick to point out, such revenues have never translated to profits and Hartmann and Uggen have yet to take any salary or benefit financially from TSP.

### *Organizational Culture*

The partnerships and collaborations that have helped fund and support The Society Pages are not only fiscal or administrative relationships. They are also about sociological content and the ongoing, collaborative project of championing sociology and disseminating its information and insights into the world. In fact, as our collaborative projects grew more autonomous and self-sustaining, many have stayed with us—continuing to share our platform and support services as members of the “community pages,” a collection of TSP-hosted sites that dramatically expand our breadth, reach, and coverage of the field.

The old adage “It Takes a Village” really applies to TSP. In many respects, the website is an umbrella operation, a collection of projects and communities, of trusted partner organizations and educational institutions. Each promotes sociology, a discipline whose scope and range defy easy summation or the synthesizing efforts of any single individual or entity. While we produce a good deal of content in-house with our graduate and undergraduate students, most of our coverage and original content is derived from our partner sites and collaborations, especially our “Community Pages.” We provide an electronic platform for these sites and partners and the technical support necessary to keep them up and running (troubleshooting is a regular topic of work and attention). The sites have great autonomy to do what they do without our oversight or supervision—indeed, regular readers of a site such as “Sociological Images” are often unaware that they are engaging with a site that is, technically, under the TSP umbrella. When appropriate, we also help to promote and publicize pieces from these partner pages on our main page, in podcasts, or via our various social media platforms.

Another key aspect of the voluntaristic, collaborative culture that defines the Society Pages is our graduate student board. This group, which has become self-sustaining and self-reproducing over the years, is really the beating heart of TSP. The student board meets every Friday throughout the academic year (and in the summers, although less regularly), pitching ideas, workshoping stories, digging into some core readings, and hosting/interrogating visitors. The graduate students write and edit much of our in-house content, such as TROTs and Discoveries, and over the years have produced podcasts, edited our social media accounts, prepared TSP-focused teaching materials, and engaged with our community pages and partner sites. TSP pays a senior graduate editor a stipend equivalent to a research assistantship and additional stipends on special projects, but the written work produced in the weekly TSP seminar is typically uncompensated (apart from course credit and, of course, writing credit). And even if we can generate the revenues needed to hire professional (nonsociologist) writers, the work of graduate and advanced

undergraduate sociology students is often better overall and better suited to our core TSP mission.

Students interested in teaching and learning have focused on developing course content and pedagogical projects such as “Teaching TSP” or syllabi collections that draw from TSP and other online sources. Board alumni such as Kyle Green and Sarah Lageson developed podcasts and a book that drew many ears and eyes, bringing traffic to TSP and helping to establish their own reputations in the field. We have also had students take on special writing projects, and feature articles, as well as build their own social media skills. Although students in the early years of the program receive course credit for participating, most serve on the board voluntarily, as service to the discipline and for experience in writing, editing, and engaging public sociology. This ethos of service and commitment, of creativity and mutual responsibility, is, in our view, key to the shared culture of TSP and the organizations and individuals who work with us. We hope that the project itself nurtures and sustains this culture, as our continued vitality and impact depend on it.

## THE GRADUATE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

We have tried never to take for granted that graduate students have always been at the core of the energy, effort, commitment, and creativity that The Society Pages was built around and what it is still today. Being on the TSP graduate student board brings opportunities but also comes with responsibilities, and, as with any public outreach project in the academy, its benefits and rewards also come with opportunity costs and tradeoffs. For instance, the work and labor associated with being on the board are always a concern. Throughout TSP's history, we have tried to ensure that graduate students are getting something out of their TSP experience because the work they do creating content for the site is largely uncompensated. We believe there is pedagogical value to board membership, and students receive course credit as well as opportunities to network, improve their writing, and get their perspectives into the world. But we also know that the costs and benefits of board membership are not the same for every student, some graduate students do not find that board membership is valuable for them, while others stay active and engaged with the site even after leaving the board. Suffice to say, it is always essential for us to take student work and experience seriously—not just in terms of producing the site but in terms of how it can work for them during their training in sociology and eventually in their careers in the field.

### *Graduate Student Professionalization*

For students in the first years of the PhD program, serving on TSP's board can provide an essential introduction to the broad field of sociology, more than is possible in a typical seminar course focused on a sub-field. Board members have the chance to make network connections when they write up a sociologist's new articles for Discoveries or ask them a few questions for a Roundtable. Graduate board members also have a chance to work on their writing collaboratively in a low-stakes environment.

We talk a lot about our “big tent” vision of sociology at The Society Pages. Although many graduate programs strive for comprehensive training and preparation, the reality is that this is challenging to implement in a large and diverse discipline. Our board members routinely pitch, write, and edit pieces about scholarship in subfields beyond their own area of developing expertise. We’ve learned that having this expansive vision of sociology and more comprehensive understanding of the debates and developments beyond specific subfields can benefit graduate students materially as well as intellectually. When our board members interview for faculty positions, for example, we often hear that their future colleagues see them as seasoned and reflective about the scholarly community within their department and within sociology more generally.

Board members’ interests in translating sociology for a public audience, and interests in pushing beyond the boundaries of traditional academic work, often coincide with a passion for teaching and making sociological concepts accessible for undergraduate students. This is something some board members have developed on The Society Pages through our teaching content, for instance. We have seen our alumni use the skills they have developed making sociology accessible to support truly excellent teaching. For instance, former board member Sarah Shannon has received two university-wide teaching awards from the University of Georgia and has written publicly about her approach to engaged teaching and scholarship. Similarly, board alum and graduate editor Hollie Nyseth Nzitatira has won university-level and college-level distinguished teaching awards from the Ohio State University.

As the academic job market shifts and changes, with tenure-track job opportunities fewer and highly competitive, projects like TSP also prepare students well for nonacademic careers. It offers skills that students might not otherwise develop during their graduate careers. These include writing for public audiences, website, and social media operations, and developing the capacity to summarize large volumes of information in very short written works, all skills that our alumni tell us that nonacademic employers prize. For instance, alumna Kia Heise uses her translational skills to guide educators teaching social justice topics in their classrooms; similarly, Sarah Catherine Moore and Amy August now work in the private sector, making complex findings accessible and making companies’ user data understandable and actionable.

### *Public Engagement, Sociological Community, and Student Motivation*

Many graduate students come to sociology with strong critiques of society and commitments to making social change. These aspirations can be difficult to realize and actualize in graduate school where so much of the curriculum and developmental work is devoted to learning the theories, methods, and skills needed to become a practicing sociologist. TSP provides an opportunity for students to begin to make good on these ideals and commitments.

We also know that this legacy of publicly engaged work extends beyond students’ time on the board. For instance, Nyseth Nzitatira told us how, in graduate school, she “thought that writing like a sociologist meant writing long paragraphs full of jargon. Thankfully, TSP changed this. As part of TSP, I learned the value of

writing for broader audiences, as well as how to speak without academic terms that do not resonate with the public.” She credits TSP with helping her develop the translational skills that she uses to disseminate her research on genocide including in TEDx talks, a New York Times op-ed, and training for high school teachers.

Furthermore, beyond the “work” of TSP is the value of The Society Pages as a structured time to build community among board members. As longtime board member Allison Nobles wrote on our site, “TSP supplies you with all sorts of intangible skills and social connections that go beyond its purpose on paper. For me, TSP was a community, a space where I found friendship and support, and a place where I learned I had value.” As many of us know, graduate school, particularly the first few years, can be an isolating and lonely place. Gathering weekly is time to do our shared work, yes, but also to share laughter and life updates.

### *Ongoing Challenges*

The intensive involvement and central importance of graduate students on The Society Pages (or any public outreach sociology project) is not without challenges. One of those is turnover. Working with a board of graduate students results in high turnover as new students enter the program and others move on to focus on their dissertations and other projects. This dynamism brings in fresh ideas and perspectives that help us create new kinds of content or reinvigorate those that we have moved to the back burner. However, high turnover of board members is also a real challenge. Each year we must work to get new board members up to speed quickly and to try to provide coverage for the topic areas and responsibilities covered by departing board members.

Moreover, the broader environment of higher education is not always conducive to publicly engaged work. Changes that our department, and the discipline more broadly, experience reverberate through TSP particularly because we work with graduate students. The past few years have been challenging, with COVID-19 forcing many seminars online. Ours is no exception and it has been difficult to maintain energy and enthusiasm among graduate students. Another reality of the pandemic era concerns smaller graduate student cohorts entering our program. With fewer new graduate students interested in serving on the board, we have had to find creative ways of keeping course enrollment and content creation going. One approach we are piloting this year is bringing on a cohort of advanced undergraduate students. We are hardly experts on involving undergraduates in public sociology, but we are already benefiting from their fresh energy and perspectives.

## **CONCLUSION: MEETING NEEDS AND DERIVING VALUE**

In this brief article, we have tried to use our experiences with the online, open-access website The Society Pages as a lens into the challenges involved in communicating and disseminating sociology for broad, general audiences. And we have shared some of the things we have learned by doing this kind of work. In particular, we have (1) identified the challenges—and some guiding principles—of

communicating with nonacademic public audiences; (2) sketched the resources, culture, and infrastructure required for regularizing and institutionalizing such a project; and, (3) highlighted the indispensable role and potential benefits of this work for sociology graduate students.

Rewarding as the work of TSP may be, nothing about it has been particularly easy or automatic, particularly since 2020. For sociologists as well as “civilians,” the COVID-19 experience has helped carve the complexity and fragility of the social world into sharper relief. And The Society Pages remains a fragile and ever-evolving project. Every year we encounter new conditions and new groups of students, must find new partners and contributors, and adapt and evolve accordingly. One of the key questions and challenges for our TSP project and for the discipline of sociology, in our view, is how to generate the resources and support needed to ensure that the work of public outreach and engagement continues on a regular basis across a range of scholars, projects, organizations, and departments.

The challenges here are individual as well as institutional and collective. For individuals, we must ask questions about the tradeoffs that individual faculty members, students, and other sociologists experience in doing publicly engaged work. What kinds of benefits or rewards are available to them, and what can be done to expand and enhance these incentives? At an organizational and institutional level, we have a collective action problem. We all have an interest in having sociology become more prominent and influential, developing what Klinenberg (2018) has called (in a different context) the “social infrastructure” for realizing this goal. But it is not clear who has the responsibility and wherewithal to get this work done. Aside from the American Sociological Association and other regional sociology associations—all of which are cash-strapped and facing enormous challenges in an era of upheavals in publishing and post-COVID conference culture—there are few organizations or entities with an immediate, direct interest in supporting this kind of work. Publishers are interested in selling books; colleges and universities have priorities that are either far grander than any single discipline or oriented toward more immediate, local issues and concerns; foundations and funders have other constituencies. And most sociology departments are struggling just to maintain the faculty, programming, and curricula they currently offer.

We cannot solve these problems here. But we can insist that the reasons we do this work and that we as a discipline must address these challenges is because we believe in the power and importance of sociology. In an increasingly broken and fragmented twenty-first-century environment, sociology—its data, insights, and analysis—is needed now more than ever. Yes, we need sociology to analyze our collective problems, but we also need sociology to help envision and usher in new solutions, as part of the coming transformations. Yet in this era of attacks on public institutions, science, and knowledge, sociology is not a given. It must be seen and supported and defended anew. In other words, sociology and the social sciences more generally must come to be understood as one of the core institutions of the public sphere (Stewart and Hartmann 2019).

Extending from this, we would also insist that this work of outreach, engagement, communication, and dissemination is not just for others; it is for us and for all sociologists. Just as TSP students benefit by thinking beyond their own areas of

specialization to grasp the full range and grand promise of sociology, so too for all sociologists. Forcing ourselves to review, synthesize, summarize, and distill what sociology offers to public, nonacademic audiences also helps us to see and appreciate the great, diverse work in the field. We can learn what ideas and concepts sociologists have produced that have found public purchase, as Hallett et al. (2019) recently discovered. Doing sociology in public and in dialogue with social actors and members of society itself (Healy 2017) can help us to see the emergence of new social forms and forces and the questions that they raise; to better understand the inequalities and injustices that are pervasive in our worlds; to begin to think about how things fit together (as well as how they fall apart). It can help us complicate and extend the analyses we have and the stories we have to tell, redirecting research questions, sharpening analyses, and drawing out implications. These are the grand promises of sociology, and doing public sociology for nonacademic audiences can help us become better sociologists and better realize these promises.

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