**In Defense of Public Writing**



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[*Image:*](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AThomas_H_Ince_-_Megaphone_1922.jpg) *American director Thomas H. Ince using a giant megaphone (Peter Milne, Motion Picture Directing; The Facts and Theories of the Newest Art, 1922)*

Hello, my name is David, and I am a scholar who writes for the public. Sometimes I even blog. I offer that mea culpa because, all too often, I am judged for not segregating my work behind the velvet rope of scholarship. I am not alone, as plenty of scholars are refusing to stay in the lane of the ivory tower, taking their talents to the pages of newspapers, websites, and television.

But that still raises eyebrows. I once heard an administrator refer to public writing as a pathology of sorts, akin to video-game addiction. To him, public writing was all about immediate gratification and ego rather than a scholarly advancement of knowledge. It was a sign of weakness, evidence of inadequacy as a scholar, proof that today’s public intellectuals were not *real* professors.

In that view, still held by many, a "peer reviewed" journal article read by 12 people is of great value while a piece written for a website, and read by more than 100,000, is a distraction from legitimate work. I have been told on several occasions that the work of writing for online publication (whether via a blog or for respected outlets like Huffington Post) is “easy” and a “waste of time.” Unlike scholarship, which is about knowledge production and intellectual debate, public writing is said to be about personal gain and pleasure resulting from public fanfare.

To still others, public writing is a form of community service: Some people give blood to the Red Cross, others donate their time at local shelters, and others donate their words to public spaces. Each of those activities is advancing public good, yet none are required or necessary components of academic life.

But instead of being unnecessary or antithetical to academic work, I would argue that public writing is -- at its core -- what we do as teachers, intellectuals, and scholars. It's another form of teaching, a public pedagogy that engages "students" outside the classroom, and inside, too.

When I started out in the era of chalkboards and typewriters, I often found it difficult to bridge the gap between course materials and current events. In those moments where course themes and theories connected with public discourse or popular culture, I was often frustrated by the absence of readings that could anchor a classroom conversation. Now I can find such materials in the work of countless scholars and intellectuals. The examples are endless: Jelani Cobb’s [writing](http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/world-ferguson) about police brutality and racism, Salamishah Tillet's [work](http://www.thenation.com/blog/175270/domestic-violence-and-george-zimmermans-defense) on partner violence and rape culture, Stacey Patton's [discussions](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-29261462) of child abuse, [Mark Anthony Neal's public scholarship](http://www.theroot.com/authors.mark_anthony_neal.html) on all things popular culture, and [Khalil Gibran Muhammad](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/06/opinion/playing-the-violence-card.html?_r=0) continued discussion of the "violence card." They, along with Jeff Chang, Brittney Cooper, James Peterson, Imani Perry, and so many others are advancing discourses inside and outside of academia. With historical examples in hand, and an analytical framework seeped in a lifetime of scholarly research, their public writings advance classroom conversation with depth and specificity. The prospect of waiting several years until a journal article is published to discuss some current event in class is unsatisfying.

Public writing is also work that bridges theories, methods, and knowledge that is often locked behind pay walls, or stuck inside books that cost as much as a new pair of Air Jordans. Essays written for a general audience often help to place scholarly research, and break down boundaries between the two. Unable to write dozens of pages on a topic, scholars writing for a mainstream publication unmask what is important in their research and how it matters.

Public writing is also a means to engage other scholars, especially those outside the academy. Professors do not have a monopoly on knowledge production; look no further than Ta-Nehisi Coates, an American writer for *The Atlantic* whose [work on culture and politics](http://www.theatlantic.com/ta-nehisi-coates/) is as "scholarly" and intellectually rich as that of any academic. Others, like Gary Younge, Jamilah Lemieux, Mychal Denzel Smith, and Dave Zirin are the forefront of important scholarly debates even if they are not taking place inside the Ivory Tower.

As an assistant professor, I regularly wrote for [Popmatters.com,](http://www.popmatters.com) a site dedicated to cultural commentary and reviews. I wrote on politics, sports, video games, and race. That experience enhanced my skills as a writer, and forced me to think about what mattered in my argument and how to write across discipline and method. Thanks to those essays I also developed professional relationships and friendships with several scholars. Writing a review of the videogame, ["NBA Ballers,"](http://www.popmatters.com/review/nba-ballers/) prompted an email from one of my intellectual heroes, who, to this day remains one of my most trusted mentors. Several opportunities, not to mention significant intellectual growth, came about because of those relationships.

The writing I do in places like *Vitae* and *Gawker* advances the work that I’ve produced in journals or within books. It allows me to get feedback from a range of readers and to expand the reach of my ideas. A tweet becomes a Facebook status, and that becomes a piece for an online venue, which may become a journal article, or a book chapter.

I write in a myriad of spaces for a variety of reasons but in the end I write because I have something to say. I write because I hope the work resonates with people I know and people I don’t. I write because it is an expression of my worldview, my work, and my identities. I write because that is what we scholars do: We think, we share, we learn, and we grow. Public writing and scholarly writing do not stand in binary opposition to one another nor are they mutually exclusive.



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