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The Past, Present and Future of Public Sociology

For many sociologists, public sociology and Michael Burawoy are indelibly associated, as if it were a project he initiated with his presidential address to the American Sociological Association in the early years of the 20th century. Though understandable when one figure has played such a crucial role in popularizing the term, such mental associations betray a complex history which precedes his formulation. In tracing the origins of the term 'public sociology', one is immediately confronted with a penumbra of problems; historical, epistemological, philosophical, ethical and political alike. Historical because there is no adequate historiography of the term, philosophical because it is an immensely difficult term to accurately pinpoint without the risk of sounding arbitrary or selective, ethical because the term's parentage is uncertain, with Gans (1989), Seidman (1998), Agger (2007) and Burawoy (2005) all aspiring to the role of the putative father, and lastly, political because, as Becker (2003: 661) notes, 'what things are called always reflects relations of power', with aspirations to legitimation, recognition, influence, and authority.

  This concatenation of dilemmas makes it difficult to establish any authoritative definition of the term 'public sociology', or provide any accurate depiction of where it resides in the relevant literature and public usage. Rather than an attempt to describe 'public sociology' as an ineluctable fact of the discipline's history, we approach it for these reasons as an ongoing, and often confusing intellectual debate. We are much more interested in the debates which now tend to be signposted using the terminology of public sociology than we are in the term itself. In this way we hope to remain grounded in the existing literature while moving beyond it to engage with the field of practice

often named using this term but which inevitably extends far beyond the naming power it is able to exercise. It also means that the thrust of our argument is relevant for other disciplines making a public turn (public anthropology, public criminology, public humanities, and so on) even if the substance of it remains oriented towards sociology. Under the platform ecosystem we all, as Healy (2017: 780) puts it, 'face the challenge of figuring out how to work successfully in a latently public, ambiently visible way'. This is true across disciplines and reflects the institutional changes we have considered in previous chapters and will return to in subsequent ones.

The past of public sociology

In the first instance of its use, in H. J. Gans' 1988 presidential address to the American Sociological Association, public sociology was ambivalently referred to initially as 'lay sociology', later as an attribute of sociologists who engage in popularizing the discipline for a broader public ('public sociologists'), and finally as 'public sociology' per se (Gans 1989: 5–7). What is remarkable and also quite puzzling about the birth of the term, however, is that it came into being almost accidentally, given that in Gans' speech and subsequent script as an article for the American Sociological Review, public sociology, unlike 'lay sociology' and 'public sociologists', is neither highlighted for emphasis, nor does it seem to feature as anything special, other than as a simple word used in passing; it is actually only mentioned once. Even if the term is used much more precisely in the specialized literature which has proliferated since Burawoy's (2005) intervention, we cite the example of Gans' presidential address to signify how the term can be used in relatively careless ways even by those who, as a matter of intellectual history, made a profound contribution to the evolution of what we term public sociology. Unlike Burawoy's (2005) project to inaugurate a new era of public sociology, mapping it out in relation to other forms of sociology in order to plot a route forward, Gans merely sought to signify a type of sociological endeavour as part of a larger argument. Seidman's (1998) use of the term is equally irregular although he does infuse it with a normative purpose. So does Agger (2007) who has grand aspirations for it as a successor script in sociology, pregnant with the possibility of re-orienting the discipline's emphasis from 'social facts' to 'literary acts', echoing Mills' (1959: 8) hope and promise for sociology to translate 'personal troubles' into 'public issues'. Michael Burawoy (2005) on the other hand, inherited both the term itself as well as its idealism from Agger, and partly from Seidman, presenting

it as a neologism armed with a revolutionary aim to reconfigure the entire discipline, without acknowledging these past uses of the term.

There was a historical ambiguity built into Burawoy's project from the outset, seeing itself as naming what had not been named (*traditional public sociology*) and rendering visible what had largely gone unseen (*organic public sociology*) while remaining at a strange distance from past attempts to render this activity visible. This isn't an attack on Burawoy's achievement but rather an illustration of how the historiography of public sociology has been ambiguous from its inception. It sought to express the reality of public sociology as an existing professional practice without a name. This existence of public sociology despite its namelessness is best described by Patricia Hill Collins (2007: 101), where she admits to have been 'doing a sociology that had no name' prior to Burawoy's popularization of the term. This can be found throughout the discipline's history. Indeed, it is remarkable to read the minutes and correspondence in Keele University's Foundations of British Sociology archive where the public orientation of sociological work is seemingly axiomatic, as opposed to being something which must be popularized and pursued. In fact the vision of Victor Branford, Patrick Geddes and their collaborators that 'sociologists could join with playwrights, poets, and other artists to write and present sociological knowledge and understanding in a way that is both accessible to a general public and could motivate them to join in a strategy of social change' feels remarkably contemporary, as does their advocacy of participatory methods so that 'those most affected by contemporary conditions' could become involved in a way that 'would allow them to participate in the formulation of social policies' (Scott and Bromley 2013: loc 2063–2119). There remains much historical work to be done exploring the inspiration that can be found in sociology's archives for the contemporary practice of public sociology.

However, if we simply frame 'public sociology' as naming a subterranean tendency, we miss the performativity of the term. This popularization also sought to reconfigure sociology as a professional field, providing visibility and prestige to activities undertaken by sociologists in a manner liable to transform the opportunity structure they confronted. It was an attempt to change how the discipline of sociology operates, based on an analysis rooted in the character of American sociology even though Burawoy later sought to extend far beyond this. It is a term which now has widespread recognition, even if this goes hand–in–hand with a semantic slippage from a technical usage (for example, distinguishing between public and professional sociology)

through to a vernacular one (as a general term for sociologists doing public facing work).

This creates a space in which problems can thrive. It encourages us to rehearse our intuitions about publics and our relationship with them while reassuring us that we are undertaking a recognized and delineated practice (public sociology) rather than a messy and precarious enterprise which requires our reflexivity in the fullest sense. In the last chapter we considered how social media is imagined within the academy (*platform imaginary*) and the assumptions about our work which have emerged around legacy platforms of scholarship (*scholastic disposition*). We argued that the scholarly orientation encourages an approach to social media that creates difficulties when it comes to building an audience, negotiating filtering mechanisms and thriving in the acoustics of social media. These problems are far from insurmountable and we argued that dislodging outputs, expertise and knowledge from their preeminent position goes a long way towards clearing the field of conceptual detritus that hinders the fullest exercise of our reflexivity in relation to these new contexts for our public action. But the tendency of public sociology to implicitly embody what Arribas Lozano (2018) describes as a 'dissemination model' further inclines us towards this platform imaginary by encouraging us to see social media in terms of its capacity to get our knowledge beyond the walls of the ivory tower so that it can help address social problems.

There is still much we can do in this mode and this chapter explores how social media can be taken up within the existing framework of public sociology in fruitful and exciting ways. However, in subsequent chapters we loosen our grip on the term somewhat in order to smooth over the problematic oscillation between the technical and vernacular uses of it. In this book we neither seek to dissolve the term nor secure it with a new meaning, particularly not one centred around the assumed brave new world of digital technology with all the ideological baggage that framing would carry (Carrigan 2019). Instead we want to use the term in a way which is consistent with this ambiguity, recognizing how the manner in which it is poised between technical specification and idiomatic shorthand is a product of its own meandering history. This legacy is what public sociology must address in the present and it has often failed to do so, leaving us with what at times feels like a chasm between the practice of public sociology and arcane debates taking place within a voluminous literature. As Healy (2017: 772) remarks acidly, much as German critical theorists 'succeeded in unifying theory and practice – in theory' the public sociology literature 'succeeded in

unifying professional and public sociology, in professional journals'. In response to this trend our approach could be characterized as quietist in Rorty's (1989) sense: we want to gently sidestep the conceptual thickets of the public sociology debate in order to turn to practice but without collapsing conceptual discussion *into* practice. We want to recover the *doing* of public sociology in a way that ensures this remains an object of theoretical reflection, as opposed to a crude actionism which would claim the problem is too much theory and too little activism. The platform ecosystem brings new challenges for public sociology which require theoretical reflection. The challenge, as we see it, lies in recalibrating the relationship between theory and practice in a way which is adequate to these new conditions and allows us to reconstruct public sociology for them.

The present of public sociology

In 2004 the American Sociological Association's erstwhile president, Michael Burawoy, endorsed 'public sociology' as the theme of its prestigious annual meeting; a neologism that paved the way for a lively debate between sociologists over the discipline's raison d'être. Although present, by allusion rather than by name, in the work of sociologists like C. Wright Mills, Alvin Gouldner, W.E.B. Du Bois and Jane Addams, the term 'public sociology' was mobilized by Burawoy in his presidential address to describe and foster a sociological ethos of publicly relevant and engaging sociological practice. As Blau and Smith (2006: xvii) observe, this gave 'a sense that the floodgates had at long last been opened and that they were liberated to profess a sociology that was relevant, critical and publicly responsible, if not in partnership with publics'. The popular appeal of Burawoy's speech, 'For Public Sociology', transcended the confines of the 2004 ASA meetings, resulting in publication in the *American Sociological Review* soon after the event, while the *British Journal of Sociology* republished the original paper and dedicated its next volume to hosting replies to Michael Burawoy with contributions from a host of distinguished scholars, followed by Burawoy's own response to his critics. 'For Public Sociology' soon appeared in multiple languages, sparking open and broad discussions between professional sociologists and a web-based database of books, papers, symposia and videos compiled by Burawoy at his Berkeley webpage. It was characterized by a fundamentally ethnographic sensibility in which Burawoy turned the ethnographic eye inward on his own profession in order to see how knowledge can be turned outwards by doing public sociology.

It is not our intention to summarize Burawoy's 11 theses or the voluminous literature which these provoked but rather to convey its appraisal of public sociology and the work this sought to do in shaping its future. This entails understanding how the public sociology Burawoy sought to champion relates to the professional practice that characterizes the core of the discipline. In Burawoy's mind sociology should remain professional above all, with this supplying true and tested methods, accumulated bodies of knowledge, with specifically oriented questions and conceptual frameworks. Research in professional sociology is conducted within research programmes that define assumptions, theories, concepts, questions and puzzles and allows these to be openly contested by critical sociology. Critical sociology examines the foundations, explicit and implicit, normative and descriptive, of the research programmes of professional sociology and hosts critical debates within and between research programmes. Most importantly, critical sociology is credited by Burawoy for giving us the two fundamental ontological questions that place the four sociologies in relation to each other; 'sociology for whom?' and 'sociology for what?' Inspired by Alfred McClung Lee's 1976 ASA presidential address, Burawoy revisits the 'sociology for whom' question, wondering whether we are simply talking to ourselves (an academic audience) or we are also addressing others (an extra–academic audience). He goes on to ask 'sociology for what' where the question mark this time examines the very substantive matter of sociology, that is the direction of the knowledge(s) produced within the discipline. This is in contrast to policy sociology which is undertaken in service of a goal defined by a client and positions itself in defence of sociological research, human subjects, funding and congressional briefings. He suggested the differences between them can be usefully characterized in terms of the distinction between 'instrumental' and 'reflexive' knowledge; the former referring to puzzle-solving professional sociology or the problem-solving of policy sociology, while the latter interrogates the value premises of our profession and society stressing the need for a dialogue between academics and various publics about the direction of research programmes and society too.

These four types of sociological knowledge constitute a functional differentiation of sociology spelling out who does what, but also four distinct perspectives on and of sociology, each trying to advance its own research initiative while recognizing their cohabitation in the same grid. Each type on its own would have been useless, in Burawoy's thinking, without its leaning to and borrowings from the others. A useful metaphor to explain this productive tension

within the discipline is to imagine each type as a soldier fighting a different battle for the same war, where professional sociology would provide the ammunition and would be the discipline's trooper, policy sociology would assume the role of the engineer while critical and public sociologies would function as the guardian and the moralist, respectively. The lived careers of sociologists unfold in the agonistic interdependence between these sociologies in a manner that can imbue their existence with an ambivalent character while also shaping the constitution of the discipline as a whole. Burawoy (2005: 13) emphasizes this with reference to a number of sociologists from W.E.B. Du Bois and C. Wright Mills in the 20th century to James Coleman and Chris Jencks in the 21st century, to illustrate this mobility within and between the quadrants, with their unusual combination of public, critical, professional and policy moments in their careers leading to a tension between institution and habitus. Each of these entails a different mode of justification which supplies these trajectories with a distinct texture, as movements between them involve differing conceptions of why we do what we do and what it means to do it effectively. Professional sociology justifies itself on the basis of scientific norms and is subjected to peer review; policy sociology justifies itself on the basis of its effectiveness and reports to clients; public sociology advertises its relevance and is accountable to a designated public, while critical sociology supplies moral visions and stands in front of a community of critical intellectuals.

In an earlier chapter, we encountered Burawoy's (2005) distinction between traditional public sociology and organic public sociology. The former is the familiar preserve of the public intellectual who uses mass media to talk and write about matters of public concern with the intention of reaching an audience beyond the academy. The publics involved in these debates are 'generally invisible in that they cannot be seen, thin in that they do not generate much internal interaction, passive in that they do not constitute a movement or organization, and they are usually mainstream' (Burawoy 2005: 7). In contrast the latter is a matter of sociologists working 'in close connection with a visible, thick, active, local and often counterpublic' with Burawoy (2004: 8) citing examples such as 'a labor movement, neighborhood associations, communities of faith, immigrant rights groups, human rights organizations'.

Even though Burawoy presents the two as complementary, he sees a tendency towards elitism within public sociology which has helped the spectacle of (usually) white men talking to dispersed audiences dominate the imagination of the public role sociology can play, in the

process marginalizing the organic public sociology often undertaken by much more diverse sociologists and going unrecognized by the disciplinary mainstream (Burawoy 2002). For example in an imagined open letter to C. Wright Mills, Burawoy (2008) takes issue with what he claims was the propensity of Mills to 'talk down to publics'. While he frames this as typical of a traditional public sociology that has tended to involve 'books written for but not with publics', it is a distinction which ought to be revisited with a view to social media because the detachment which Burawoy sees as the basis of this elitism is precisely what is undergoing a subtle transformation driven (inter alia) by social media. Following Bacevic (2019a, 2019b, 2019c), we are interested in the institutional and imaginative (re)construction of this distance and see it as eroded by the tendency of social platforms to facilitate interaction across distinct sectors of social life. We need a conception of public sociology which is adequate to the platformized boundary work which this entails.

Traditional public sociology

Print media

If traditional public sociology tends to be exhausted in the imagination of sociologists by op-eds in papers of records, the proliferation of new modes of publication is exciting and important. Online publications which feature academy commentary have proliferated in recent years. Aeon, Open Democracy, Slate, Quartz, Current Affairs, Public Seminar, Jacobin, Real Life and the New Inquiry are just a few examples of the many outlets which recruit academics, often without the constraints of length and style which tend to be attached to the op-ed. These are joined by expanding online supplements to familiar magazines and newspapers. Furthermore, there is a vibrant ecology of academic blogs, ranging from the small and amateur through to the large and professionalized, which traverse sectoral boundaries and inevitably attract at least some interested non-academic audience even when their content is unapologetically academic. This crossover potential can be seen most strikingly in the hosting deal the Monkey Cage political science blog signed with the *Washington Post*, effectively incorporating itself into the global newspaper's online stable.

Even if the traditional op-ed retains its lure, there are many advantages to publishing with online magazines: freedom from the news cycle, more space to make an argument and the likelihood a well-received piece will be published elsewhere (Stein and Daniels 2017: 44–45).

The last point reflects an important feature of an online ecosystem in which formal and informal syndication agreements are common: blog posts are republished across a network of connected sites, with larger sites often relating to smaller ones as reliable sources of content. This is particularly pronounced with an initiative like The Conversation where syndication in the mass media is often an outcome and professional journalists work with academics to produce pieces in a style which renders this more likely. However, it often takes a more quotidian form where blog editors have informal reposting relationships between themselves or a number of online magazines cooperate where they have overlapping interests. Under these conditions articles travel, through social media and republishing, in a way which would have been difficult to conceive of in a past media environment. In the most straightforward sense, there are simply more outlets willing to publish social scientific analysis than was previously the case. Whereas Wolfgang Streeck (2011) could ask a decade ago whether sociology had a 'demand problem', quite the opposite is now true when there are more forums than ever for sociological research to be published for varying sizes of public audience.

There are reasons we ought to be cautious about this. For example, The Conversation has generated controversy in recent years for its policy of refusing access to those without a university affiliation, with their distinctive funding model of subscriptions by universities exercising a constraint over their operations. It's not our intention to intervene in this controversy, as two authors who have actively supported The Conversation and remain interested in the potential of this model. However, the case illustrates key issues which are at stake in traditional public sociology within the new media ecology. Who labours to produce content? How is this labour reimbursed? What value is added to this labour? Who benefits from it? In the case of The Conversation, its tight cleavage with the university system means the labour falls under the rubric of the impact agenda; universities are in practice buying access to editorial support and a distribution platform for their academics to undertake activity which is now expected as part of their occupational role. The added value comes from the editorial expertise provided, with a professional journalist working with each academic on a one–to–one basis, as well as the promotional expertise they have accumulated.

We shouldn't lose sight of how an underlying transformation in publishing, with less staff being expected to produce more copy, means there is more demand for authors than ever before (Abramson 2019). At risk of putting this too bluntly: are academics just overly verbose

journalists who write for free? Even if it would be simplistic to answer 'yes' to this question and simply move on, it is a reminder that we must remain attentive to a political economy of digital publishing which is still unfolding, as struggling publishers adapt to an environment now transformed by social media (Caplan and boyd 2018, Fourier 2018). It is crucial that public sociology remains reflexive in this environment so that we can reflectively adapt and seek to intervene in shaping a landscape that is still far from settled. We need to sustain a professional awareness of these changes, including criticizing them when necessary. The risk is that we otherwise confront them as a series of individualized opportunities to get our research 'out there' without attending to the aggregate consequences of embracing these developments.

Social media can make academics more easily discoverable by the media. The role which learned societies and communications offices once played as gatekeepers to expertise is steadily eroding as a simple internet search will often prove quicker and easier for journalists or broadcast researchers seeking expertise relevant to their work. It's important to stress that this is a new relation with the media rather than the disintermediation promised by the cyberutopian prophets – the role of gatekeepers changes rather than being eliminated. Existing media players are more powerful than ever, as gatekeepers to online audiences and mediators of message, even if the manner in which they exercise this power has changed (Couldry 2012). Interactions of this sort are not dependent on social media but having a personal presence on these platforms can be a valuable way to mediate the relationship. What matters is the digital footprint: the traces which an academic leaves about their work online which might be found by someone in the media and encourage them to make contact. What might otherwise seem to be a narcissistic concern for online identity can actually be a crucial practice of curating one's identity, ensuing a digital footprint expresses a desirable narrative and making it less likely a reader will infer unhelpful conclusions on the basis of it (Carrigan 2019: 150–173). A platform like Twitter is well suited to building relationships across institutional boundaries, facilitating a thin relationship to be sustained that can be activated for collaboration at a later date.

However, the interface between the academy and the media can also be rather messy. Many social scientists with a large digital footprint have found themselves emailed by a journalist with a deadline and a request for a quote, in some cases specifying what they would like the academic to say to an uncomfortably specific degree. While this might not be problematic in itself, these requests can often betray a lack of research (having little to no relevance to one's topic of study) and be

framed in a panicked tone which asks for a response within hours. This clash of temporal regimes can be jarring to those party to it, not least of all for journalists who often find the glacial pace of knowledge production in the academy frustrating when they are forced to engage with it. This can be a problem for ambitious projects which seek to bridge the gap between research and journalism, as was the case for the Reading the Riots project undertaken by the LSE and the *Guardian* after the English riots of 2011 (Carrigan and Brumley 2013). The increasingly porous interface between the media and the academy can also be a problem when it leads journalists to report on tweets, in some cases opening up the academics involved to online abuse when their tweets are taken out of context. But this is unlikely to change given the uptake of social media by journalists and academics, rendering it the new normal to which public sociology must adapt. This in turn calls into question the existing relationship between the two groups, in which academics relied on journalists to translate their research for a general audience (Stein and Daniels 2017).

Books

Thus far we have focused on magazines and newspapers, exploring how this traditional preserve of public sociology has been changed by the proliferation of new outlets and a transformed environment in which they operate. Books are no less significant, either as a route through which traditional public sociology can be undertaken or as a vector through which social media is making itself felt in the circulation of knowledge. While one of our central arguments is that public sociology is likely to be ineffective in the platform era if its imaginary remains dominated by the book, it won't have escaped your awareness that this is an argument you are reading in a book. It's not so much that we need to leave behind 'old' ways of doing public sociology in order to embrace 'new' ones but rather adapting to an environment in which the former and the latter are possible moments in a broader trajectory of publicness (Healy 2017). The characteristics of platforms which we encountered in Chapters 2 and 3, particularly their visibility and spreadibility, render our everyday orientation towards publicness much more important in relation to the publicity of our outputs than was previously the case. In fact success at the traditional undertakings of public sociology increasingly depends on a willingness to engage prior to and following the publication, as publishers look to the 'platform' (in the sense of an existing audience and ability to command attention) an author brings with them when making commissioning decisions

(Thompson 2010: 86). Much as the visibility accumulated through social media can be transformed into academic capital under certain conditions (such as when the capacity to be an 'engaged academic' is valued by institutions), it can also be transformed into media capital when publishers are concerned about the crossover potential of academic books in a crowded marketplace (Couldry 2003).

Stein and Daniels (2017: 82–83) reflect what this means in practice when pitching books to publishers who are concerned about an author's capacity to attract and sustain a relationship with an audience. There is a profound opportunity to deepen engagement with an audience through these dialogues which surround the publication process but we should also recognize how they are driven by the competitive pressures of an attention economy, necessitating a form of brand management which is an emotionally and temporally costly undertaking that remains unpaid by the publishers who benefit from it (Marwick 2013). It's also an enforced sociality which is much easier for white European males such as ourselves who are rarely objects of online abuse, ranging from the draining accumulation of chronic mansplaining through to criminal levels of harassment which are a recurrent feature of platforms for women, people of colour, queer, trans and differently abled scholars (Carrigan 2019: 121–149). If we remain fixated on the outputs, talking merely about new online magazines we could write for and new outlets through which to promote our books, it would be difficult to understand the platform ecosystem and what it means for different groups within the academy who are seeking an audience. This is why we need a sociology of publics in Burawoy's (2004) sense, helping us understand the shifting ontology of public life and what it means for the aspiration towards public sociology. However, it also has a more instrumental purpose, facilitating the mental mapping necessary to negotiate what Beer (2013) describes as the politics of circulation encountered across digital platforms: who gets heard, why they get heard and how what they say travels. This is another way of talking about what we considered in the last section as the acoustics of social media (Margetts 2017a). Decentring our focus away from outputs is not a rejection of their importance but is inter alia a strategy for better ensuring their successful circulation of an expanded array of publications (books, chapters, papers, essays, blog posts, podcasts, videocasts, tweets) in an information environment as rife with opportunities as it is challenges.

In fact, books are a particularly interesting output through which to understand the shift in the politics of circulation underway and what it means for the familiar outputs of traditional public sociology. As

Stein and Daniels (2017: 74) reflect in a thoughtful appraisal of the possibilities and pitfalls involved in writing books of social science for popular audiences:

> While some scholars may see such books as outside the bounds of academic knowledge production, they are in fact sophisticated translations of social science for general audiences. These works of popular social science were widely reviewed, generating a host of new conversations about the nature of urban poverty, the changing roles of men and women, the politics of intelligence testing, and Americans' false fears and assumptions, among other topics.

There is a remarkable public hunger for books of this sort, even if it might fall short of the audience that greeted some of the canonical works of traditional public sociology (Carrigan 2019: 95). There has also been a rich vein of popular social scientific writing in recent years produced by journalists drawing on academic research. Perhaps the foremost figure has been Malcolm Gladwell, whose most popular books have sold millions of copies. He was the recipient of the inaugural American Sociological Association Award for Excellence in the Reporting of Social Issues in 2007. The *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, occupying a similar intellectual niche to Gladwell, came to be awarded the same honour in 2011. The ASA's (2011) award statement illustrates how sociological knowledge comes to be represented in the work of such public figures, observing that 'his columns have described or otherwise promoted the work of scholars including Manuel Castells, Christopher Jencks, Lisa Keister, Annette Lareau, and Robert Wuthnow'. Given the body making the award, it is understandable that it is concerned with the presence of sociological themes in the author's work. However, there are other influences at work, particularly social psychology, which point to the ambiguity involved in seizing on journalists and opinion formers as champions of the discipline, even if encouraging outreach of this sort is nevertheless a valuable activity.

We should be cautious in our engagements with Gans' (2016) 'presenters'. Even if we were to count such figures uncritically as public proponents of sociological thought, we would still confront a public sphere saturated with psychological and economic analysis exemplified by a title like *Freakonomics*, a collaboration between a 'rogue economist' and a journalist which had sold 4 million copies worldwide by late 2009. It subsequently spawned a sequel, a documentary, a podcast and

a consulting group. Prominent behavioural economists figured in the latter project, particularly Daniel Kahneman who became a best-selling author himself with his *Thinking Fast and Slow*. This summary of his lifelong research, foundational to behavioural economics had sold over a million copies by 2012. Sociologists face an intellectual marketplace which is extremely crowded by other disciplines, as well as journalists popularizing social science. In the face of this challenge, skilful engagement with social media is as much the price of admission as it is an opportunity to get your research 'out there'. However, this isn't a matter of compulsively seeking followers but rather understanding the platform ecosystem so as to be able to use it to your strategic advantage. This is what we think of as **platform literacy** and it's necessary to negotiate the challenges and opportunities which are opening up for the practice of public sociology.

Reviews

For example, it is still far from clear what role social media is coming to play in the reviews, conversations and political discussions likely to flow from such books. There has been an exciting emergence of digitally native review sites, ranging from the public–literary (LA Review of Books) through to the scholarly–academic (LSE Review of Books). This has been supplemented by literary journals undergoing something of a renaissance, encompassing the existing (*London Review of Books*) and the new entrants (n+1), as well as a tendency for academic journals to move their book reviews onto free to access sites (*Theory, Culture, Society*). However, there are also dedicated platforms for 'lay' book reviewing, as well as countless conversations about books taking place on mass commercial social media platforms. For example, there are 85 million registered members of Good Reads and this is merely the most popular of a number of book platforms (Statista 2019). We also shouldn't forget the role reviews play on a platform like Amazon, even if there remain many questions about the significance we should attribute to them (Stone 2013). Even if the audience for popular social science books has in one sense fragmented, in another sense it has become much more open and connected.

Social media offers exciting opportunities to build multifaceted conversations with such a readership, making it possible to supplement books which tend to be devoid of jargon and distant from the literature with pathways into scholarship that interested readers might follow. It's undeniably the case that some topics simply have much greater capacity to incite public interest than others (Stein and Daniels 2017: 65).

This has been our own experience as sociologists whose work on asexuality (Carrigan 2011) and UK grime and drill music (Fatsis, 2019a, 2019b) has attracted much public interest but our other work on social ontology and history of public sociology has attracted much less. Furthermore, epistemic hierarchies make themselves felt in the attention economy such that it will often prove easier for economists and psychologists to attract an audience then it will be for sociologists and anthropologists. Nonetheless, we shouldn't treat these hierarchies as fixed, even as we take them seriously as practical constraints. The evaluative cultures which platforms are giving rise to, even if they are largely predicated on thin social relations, suggest that participation in them could play a role in rendering these hierarchies mutable. Skilful engagement with review sites, particularly smaller and more specialized ones, offer important opportunities. The same is true with a view to the podcasting boom and the sustained influence of YouTube, with podcasts and channels existing across an incredibly diverse range of topics that have an interest in academic work. These include podcasts produced by mainstream media organizations which provide avenues for academic engagement, if for no other reason than there's more channel space which needs to be filled (usually with less budget with which to fill it). Perhaps more excitingly, it includes a thriving ecology of grassroots podcasts which are increasingly media operations in their own right through their use of crowdfunding platforms, often pushing beyond the frontiers of the traditional media and offering exciting avenues for academic debate and discussion. These include popular podcasts established by academic with vast audiences. For example, the Talking Politics podcast based at the University of Cambridge's Department of Politics and International Studies has been downloaded over 5 million times while the Philosophy Bites podcast has been downloaded over 40 million times. As we will discuss in greater depth, when these are successful they have consolidated a bond with an audience. The theoretical significance of this will have to wait for another chapter but we wished to underscore the practical opportunity it offers.

It's important to reiterate the extent to which engagement can be read as a form of emotional labour which the attention economy renders necessary, increasingly expected by book publishers and suggested by magazines and newspapers (Marwick 2013). Sharing updates, responding to messages and filtering content can be a time consuming process, particularly if it is undertaken with a resigned sense of necessity. It can often feel like work and in an important sense it is work. These platforms come with their own sunk costs, leaving

one more or less committed to a platform where one has invested time in building connections. This engagement can't be reduced to a transaction but much of the behaviour of academics on it becomes somewhat inexplicable if we deny the contours of strategic conduct. It's a necessary feature of accumulating visibility within the platform ecosystem and until we become comfortable talking about that necessity, it will remain difficult to provide support and guidance to each other on how to negotiate it.

Organic public sociology

Platforms collapse the distance between author and reader in the manner analysed by Stewart (2018) and Seymour (2019) while also rendering it necessary to shout in order to be heard, at the very least suggesting to publishers that you exhibit an independent potential to be heard. However, there remains an ambiguity about the point at which self-promotion in this sense bleeds into public engagement. If your engagement with an audience is centred around a matter of common concern, is talking to them about a piece you wrote on this topic *really* self-promotion? It is a notion with a transactional connotation that belies the affective richness of online interaction (Papacharissi 2015). If what you are doing is an expression of what matters to you, in Sayer's (2011) sense of motivating your activity as well as imbuing it with meaning, characterizing it in terms of a transaction is an alienated (and possibly alienating) way of understanding your own behaviour. This isn't to deny that self-promotion exists, it's rather to interrogate how we frame the concept and its implied relationship to promotion which lacks the implied strategic element. Too often there's an implicit moral psychology lurking within the notion, suggesting a clear division between instrumental rationality and value rationality, which obscures rather than clarifies the practical dimensions of using social platforms for public sociology.

Social media platforms exist in part to choreograph interactions around shared interests, simply because this is a reliable means to keep users engaged with the platform. This means that building an audience can be a matter of value rationality as much as instrumentality, helping us see a way to transcend the antinomy introduced in Chapter 3: for public sociologists acting out of a commitment to a cause, building an audience on social media is organic public sociology. It is a particularly *thin* form of it but its value shouldn't be underestimated. Under conditions of social distancing, it is also the only form of audience building which is likely to be accessible. This doesn't mean we should

be uncritical of the activity, let alone the corporate platforms on which it depends. However, it does suggest we ought to recognize its potential uses while avoiding any a priori judgement that 'online' organization is inherently inferior to 'offline' organization.

It's not a replacement for the other forms which organic public sociology can take but it has the potential to function as a powerful precursor to them, including a fuzzing up of the boundary between inside/outside that is usually entailed by a scholarly orientation. Interactions with them could easily be perceived as transactional, often involving little more than ensuring the mutual flow of information across sectoral boundaries. These minimal units of social interaction, particularly pronounced on a platform like Twitter, often give rise to unfamiliar forms of ambient knowledge that shouldn't be underestimated. While each particular insight may be trivial, it nonetheless contributes to what Reichelt (2007) calls 'ambient intimacy': a background of awareness about other people and their lives, facilitating a degree of acquaintance with peripheral social connections which would otherwise be precluded by constraints of time, energy and geography. This is something which can feed back into 'offline' relations, as the bonding of occasional meetings is reinforced by an undercurrent of mediated connection. This can be supplemented by more direct forms of engagement that could lead to any number of developments depending on how the interaction proceeds.

It might help to offer an example of what this entails in practice. One of us spent a number of years undertaking research with the asexual community, fascinated by how their experience complicated orthodox understandings of sexuality and frustrated by the complete absence of this group from the existing literature on the sociology of sexuality (Carrigan 2011, 2013). There are plausible reasons to believe there have always been people who do not experience sexual attraction but until the internet it was difficult for members of such a dispersed group to find each other and share their experiences. The role that digital platforms have played in the formation of this community, through the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network bulletin board (founded in 2001) and the range of social media platforms which emerged in the ensuing years, ensure a degree of organization that would otherwise be unlikely. This includes outreach initiatives with researchers and the media, seeking to raise awareness and encourage engagement, ranging from the collectively planned through to the individually spontaneous.

This means that research is read, discussed and sometimes criticized in ways that are particularly visible in the relatively small field of asexuality studies (Carrigan et al 2013). This can be enormously beneficial in

providing opportunities for familiarization, interaction and learning that can feed directly into the research process. Under these conditions a slide into advocacy occurs easily through the opportunities for work with the media, contributions to campaigns, speaking at events and participation in public conversations which ensue from the increasing density of connections with the group in question. But it can also be difficult for those researchers who expect to work at a distance from those they are writing about and are unprepared for the latently public character, to use Healy's (2017) term, which work in relation to such a proactive online group inevitably comes to possess. This isn't just a matter of social platforms eroding the boundary between the university and other sectors, it's the agency of those we write about responding to our representation of them across these increasingly porous institutional divides.

If we insist on thinking in terms of research/dissemination phases (outputs), experts studying non–experts (expertise) and the accumulation of knowledge as inherently efficacious (knowledge) then the coordinates of this process remain difficult to grasp. But once we decentre these elements from the pride of place they enjoyed with legacy platforms then a new mode of organic engagements becomes legible in which research and advocacy merge into one another, at least when it comes to already constituted publics like the asexual community. Social media offers new ways of identifying and beginning to engage with groups, of supporting groups and of making this activity visible within the academy in a way that might draw others into their remit (Pausé and Russell 2016). Social media is changing how such groups can come together, particularly in their initial stages, by offering new opportunities and challenges for assembling similarly-concerned people in time and space (Carrigan 2016). It's a complex and exciting process which we struggle to grasp, either theoretically or practically, if we remain wedded to the categories of legacy scholarship. But it's also a challenging undertaking which can't be assumed to be successful simply in virtue of the communicative powers of social platforms (Shephard et al 2018). It requires careful reflection and sustained work in order to develop reliable and adaptable strategies to guide what we are doing. Most of all it requires platform literacy so that we understand how social platforms facilitate and frustrate such undertakings, as well as how we can act in ways which encourage the former and avoid the latter.

A similar point can be made about students, a group who have been invoked within the literature as a significant public for sociology, with whom our relationship is changing as social media cuts through the ivory tower (Burawoy 2005, Gans 2016). In the British context, student

engagement is prized throughout the academy, framed by management as the barometer of success under conditions of marketization. Yet forms of student engagement which fall outside of this managerial conception are readily derided as pathological, leading to sanctions which may in some cases go as far as police involvement and legal action. Such examples are comparatively rare, usually confined to truncated periods of upheaval within the campus life of an institution, while being all the more illustrative for being exceptions. They reveal the narrow confines within which 'engagement' is encouraged, suggesting what is in fact hoped for is predictable action from individual students, rather than the collective assertion of a student body in pursuit of self-derived objectives. What is sought is *involvement*, the weakest sense of engagement, without the participation crucial to the stronger sense of the term (Kelty 2020).

There are exciting opportunities for public sociology with students in this context. For example, cases of students seeking to exercise an influence over the curriculum have proliferated in recent years. These range from university wide campaigns, such as Liberate The Curriculum by the National Union of Students in the UK and the Decolonise The Curriculum movement, through to discipline specific campaigns, such as the Cambridge Society for Economic Pluralism and the Post-Crash Economics Society. While students calling for curriculum reform is a familiar occurrence, with much earlier roots in the expansion of higher education coupled with the radicalizing influence of new social movements, it is worth noting how these campaigns have drawn on social media in pursuit of their aims, as well as how the issues they address have been debated through these platforms by the wider academic community.

For instance Rethinking Economics, a global network of campaigns to diversify the teaching of economics with its origins in conversations taking place at the University of Sydney in the 1990s, enjoys a substantial following across social media: 16,800 Twitter followers, 18,930 Facebook followers and 852 YouTube subscribers at the time of writing. The latter seems particularly significant, as a diverse array of 22 full–length lectures facilitate the circulation of substantive academic perspectives far beyond the confines of the rooms where these events were held. The Decolonise The Curriculum movement, working to overcome the eurocentrism of the curriculum, grew in recent years across universities in the UK, with the Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford campaign being a crucial vector in its development. As Sabarantam (2017) notes, 'contestations over the politics of knowledge are as old as universities themselves and in this sense the present student campaign is

itself a manifestation of the fusty old academic tradition – to challenge received wisdom, to ask questions about society and to generate the insight needed to change the world'.

What makes these campaigns noteworthy are the speed with which they've spread, the visibility they have accrued and how effective they have been in many cases. Participation can range from encouraging debate within seminars, adapting reading lists and participating in events through to organizing campaigns and engaging in public advocacy about these issues. However, this is complex and challenging terrain. The rise of 'free speech' as an organizing principle for the political right, with the university as its crucible as Davies (2018) observes, means that advocates must tread carefully when think tanks, pressure groups and attack journalists listen in to a once opaque ivory tower which is increasingly made of transparent glass (Carrigan 2017b). Furthermore, there is no reason to be confident these mobilizations will be in pursuit of progressive causes, as projects like Professor Watchlist encourage conservative students to report on the perceived bias of their professors. Given the likelihood that the COVID-19 crisis will only entrench political polarization, we can plausibly expect such undertakings will grow as they seek to take advantage of the rapidly declining logistical costs associated with intervening in campus politics.

There are opportunities for organic public sociology with students which digital platforms open up but they simultaneously contribute to an environment in which such involvement or its absence are increasingly likely to be contested. This further erodes the distinction considered in the previous chapter between 'in here' and 'out there' such that politics becomes either something we engage in once we leave the ivory tower or something we do through our scholarship which is elevated to politically efficacious status through our faith in speech acts (Bacevic 2019a, 2019b). It is a difficult context which is likely to become more so with time, even if the contours of these changes vary between national systems. Though we must recognize when considering the upsurge of student activism and the possibility of our contribution to it that, as Bhambra (2016) points out, 'the marketization of the public university entails an attack on precisely this diversity within the institutional forms of knowledge production'. Sociology is a discipline which grew, particularly in the UK, through the expansion of higher education (coupled with the influence of new social movements) and its intellectual character has always been bound up in the dynamics of that expansion (Williams et al 2017).

This is why the transformation of the sector poses such a challenge for public sociology: the encounter Burawoy (2004) describes between

the discipline and 'diverse publics' risks becoming decreasingly likely, intensifying a broader set of pathologies afflicting the discipline (Holmwood 2010, Beer 2014). This is why the university figures prominently in the coming chapters because it remains the grounds from which sociologists employed within it undertake public sociology, even if these endeavours can't easily be captured by a sense of the university's boundaries. Students as publics embody this powerfully by reminding us that the politics taking place 'in here' (marketization, metricization and managerialism) influence the relationship we have with publics who we tend to think of as 'out there'. In this sense public sociology can provide a frame for political activity within the university, particularly the defence of the public university, without being confined to the university and those who work within it.

The role of social platforms in this is more obvious than ever given the **crisis platformization** which COVID-19 has necessitated, with universities rapidly pivoting towards online operations to cope with the requirements of social distancing. Digital platforms have enabled a rapid pivot towards online operations to cope with the requirements of social distancing, with this transition being a short sharp shock disrupting the personal and collective routines on which organizations depend. However, the same platforms provide us with the means to collectively make sense of this transformation, as well as exercise an influence over them. We are suggesting that public sociology be seen as part of such an undertaking, refusing a clear boundary between 'in here' and 'out there' in order to investigate the conditions of our labour in a rapidly changing academy and what this means for our potential undertakings.

The future of public sociology

In these terms social media seems like an obvious benefit for public sociology. However, there are many problems which we have only touched on here. In part this is because we don't intend the present volume as a manual: Carrigan (2019), Mollett et al (2017) and Stein and Daniels (2017) each perform this role in different ways. Our focus will be on conceptualizing the sources of these problems rather than on enumerating the practical difficulties which academics typically encounter in their use of them. In doing so we want to move beyond a focus on how individuals can use platforms for their own purposes, characteristic of so much of the scholarly and grey literature on social media for academics, in order to consider how we can collectively build projects which take advantage of the opportunities while mitigating the problems of platforms. This will be the first step in moving beyond a

public sociology which is tied to the legacy platforms of scholarship in order to develop a framework which is oriented towards the problems and prospects of social media. These are platforms which it should be remembered emerged at around the same time as Burawoy's (2005) ASA address (Healy 2017: 771). Facebook was founded a few months before, YouTube the following year and Twitter the year after that. Now that the full significance of these platforms appears clear, it is necessary to rethink public sociology in light of them. Particularly when we remain dependent on them at the time of writing for intellectual conviviality, as social distancing means that face-to-face conferences, seminars and workshops remain untenable. Even if this situation will prove to be a fleeting occurrence, this radicalized dependence on social platforms should be an experience we learn from as we seek to imagine what scholarship looks like under changing circumstances.

We can take inspiration in this challenge from platform cooperativism, the diverse and growing movement which seeks to develop equitable and participatory alternatives to corporate intermediaries. As one of its initiators Scholz (2017: 191) has put it, 'platform capitalism is getting defined top-down by decisions made in Silicon Valley, executed by black box algorithms' but platform cooperativism can provide 'a new story about sharing, aggregation, openness, and cooperation; one that we can believe in'. There are examples which can be seen in a wide array of sectors, ranging from transportation through to photography and time-banking. In some cases these projects have been backed by trade unions resisting the encroachment of digital platforms into a sector, in others they are supported by city governments eager to find alternatives to municipal disruptions and others still have been driven by alliances of producers within particular fields. These initiatives share a concern to utilize the affordances of the platform structure, supporting interaction between parties for a specific purpose, while rejecting the notion that the data this generates should be extracted and utilized for private gain. This helps illustrate how problems are not inherent in technology but reflect their design and deployment in particular contexts.

We can already see examples of these within higher education. Humanities Commons was developed by the office of scholarly communication at the Modern Language Association, with funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Its explicit focus is on 'providing a space to discuss, share, and store cutting-edge research and innovative pedagogy – not on generating profits from users' intellectual and personal data'[1]. A project like this is exciting and embodies the

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potential for platform cooperativism in higher education, suggesting the scale of what might become possible as ambition grows and resources become more easily available for work in this area. In doing so, we avoid the temptation to frame platforms as an intrusion from the outside, reproducing what Bacevic (2017b) identifies as a common trope: if we are constantly looking out towards the enemies who are perceived to be at the gate, we mystify our own role inside the university and our responsibility for it. This is why the sociology of the platform university figures so heavily in the subsequent chapters, as we need to understand the interpenetration between digital platforms and university operations if we wish to intervene in this landscape (Robertson 2019).

However, as well as building platforms which operate as alternatives to commercial offerings, we should not lose sight of how existing technologies can be deployed and repurposed to further collective ends. This involves the other sense of platform, as a position from which to speak, which it might be necessary to recover. For example, larger academic blogs tend to represent a platform in this sense, with the collective behind them having designed and built an infrastructure, using a WordPress installation on a private server and a Twitter feed for dissemination, which enables individual authors to reach an audience which the project as a whole assembles over time. There are many examples we can find of platforms in this broader sense, including many which are unlikely to be noticed beyond the field in which they operate. These initiatives range across online magazines, podcast series, YouTube channels, Twitter accounts and many other forms. Under conditions of social distancing they have become the main means through which intellectual exchange occurs within the academy, replacing the social infrastructure of conferences, workshops and seminars which are so familiar that we rarely reflect on them *as* infrastructure.

These initiatives are dazzling in their diversity but if we see them as instances of the same category, academics using the affordances of digital media to build platforms from which to speak and influence, a rich ecosystem of creative and collaborative activity soon becomes recognizable around us. It is a social infrastructure for scholarship which has emerged haphazardly but should now be an object of our care and concern, particularly given its necessity under the crisis conditions which exist at the time of writing. In this sense, cooperative platforms aren't intrinsically about building technical infrastructure, as much as the most exciting and high profile cases might involve this, but rather finding ways to work together to leverage what digital environments allow us to do for communal ends which express our commitment.

However, the most significant feature of these collective endeavours is how they mediate the problems of platforms, creating the possibility that digital engagement becomes a shared undertaking rather than an individual pursuit. It is this possibility and the preconditions necessary for it which we turn to next.