

Public Sociology and its Publics

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Abstract Now that public sociology is beginning to move into mainstream sociology, it is necessary to understand the vital if indirect part the general public plays in the creation of public sociology. Although that sociology requires sociological work which is relevant and useful to sectors of the general public and is written in non-technical language, presenters are needed to propose that the work is eligible to become public sociology. Still, the public makes the final decision about whether it will literally become public sociology. This article hypothesizes about the process by which sociological works are transformed into public sociology, focusing particularly on the journalists, publishers, social media participants and other presenters. Empirical studies are needed to test these hypotheses, for a better understanding of the production of public sociology is needed so that it can contribute to the vitality of the discipline in the years to come.

Keywords Public sociology · General public · Presenters · Sociology and journalism

Public sociology has become a recognized sector of the discipline since Michael Burawoy made the concept the theme of his 2004 ASA presidential address (Burawoy 2005). A considerable amount of intra-disciplinary discussion of public sociology followed, resulting in several books and a number of symposia and special issues in leading journals all over the world. It has even joined the list of A.S.A sections.

Most of the discussion of public sociology took place in the 5 years immediately following the Burawoy address. Moreover, almost all of it dealt with sociology, virtually ignoring the public and the role it plays in the realization of public sociology.¹

¹Actually, a good deal of the discussion dealt with the possible dangers of public sociology to basic research and other components of academic sociology.

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Even so, while sociologists are necessary to the creation of public sociology, the public is the sufficient factor, for until it accepts the sociology we present, it cannot become public sociology. The public shares that role with the organizations and people that present sociological work to the public, such as journalists and publishers, whom I shall call presenters.

Thus, sociologists can undertake and publish research that the discipline (“we” hereafter) intends or hopes to become public sociology, only for it to be ignored or rejected by the presenters and the public. Conversely, we can also publish basic research that can nevertheless attract the public. True, we have to start the ball rolling but ultimately, we have limited control over what becomes public sociology. The public has the last word.

Consequently, in order to determine how we can advance public sociology, we must understand the process by which sociology reaches the presenters and the public, and which of our work becomes public sociology. The rest of this paper offers some hypotheses about that process, but they should be tested by empirical studies.

What Is Public Sociology?

One of the subjects that needs further discussion is the nature of public sociology itself, since it can come in several varieties. I will limit my discussion to what appears to be the primary variety: any sociological writing or other product created by sociologists that obtains the attention of some of the publics that make up the general public.²

The writing can be a book, or an article, or even a few paragraphs reporting a new idea or finding. The other products may be created in any of the ever increasing number of communication outlets, from radio and television to the latest websites, search engines and social media. A podcast lecture, and even a summary of a lecture may already reach more of the public than anything we write.

Whatever form the product takes, it must be presented in clear and parsimonious language, with as little technical vocabulary as possible. This is important not only to help the public understand the product, but also to enable the presenters, who are generally not sociologists, to communicate it to their publics.

Even if the public has the last word, we have the first, enabling us to undertake the research-and-writing we believe to be necessary and desirable. Ideally, it should be no different from basic or any other kind of sociological research, as long as it is in non-technical English.

The possibility of that research becoming public sociology is increased if it is in some way relevant or useful to the public, but its members, like everyone else, are sometimes most accepting of the unexpected. Moreover, we have the right to present what we believe the public needs to know, especially since the public has the right to ignore us.

This conception of public sociology includes a number of details that suggest issues which require further discussion - if and when the discipline resumes the discussion of

² Burawoy (2005, p7) describes a second kind of public sociology, which he calls organic, “in which the sociologist works in close connection with a visible, thick, active, local and often counter-public.” For a somewhat similar conception see Nyden (2014).

public sociology. For example, should a journalist's report of a sociological product be considered public sociology? Further, how serious does the public's attention have to be, and how is that measured, or are other forms of reception just as valid?

Also, how extensive or detailed must the product be. Should it be a book, or an article, or would a comprehensive summary be sufficient? Could an op-ed be such a summary? Would a video or a podcast be public sociology, or is a documentary required, even though it attracts a much smaller audience.

There is also the question of whether our currently most frequent public function, that is, to supply quotes to journalists and other writers that support or legitimate their work can be considered public sociology - even if it is a snippet from a long conversation with the journalist. Quote supplying adds a little to the visibility of the supplier, and indirectly to the discipline, in part because it is publicized both by the discipline and the supplier's employer, but the resulting product is usually too brief to be considered public sociology.

The Publics

The public is usually viewed as a general public, a construct of the non-sociologist population, although in reality it consists of many specific publics. Sociologists know very little about their specific publics and someday, it is hoped, they will do the needed research to identify them. Until then, speculation will have to suffice, and mine suggests that there are four major publics. Two consist of students, and two others of people who have completed their schooling.

The first public is made up of college students taking sociology courses. They are an involuntary, and in fact a captive audience since they are doing assigned readings, although some instructors may assign readings that have already become popular with the non-student public. After graduation, the students may join that public, particularly if their courses have stimulated their curiosity.³

The second public consists of other college students, who are assigned sociological articles or books in one or more of the courses they are taking. These may be other social science or professional school courses - and sometimes they are basic liberal arts and humanities courses. However, much of the reading they do is already, or is on the way to becoming public sociology.

Because of the number of students and courses in these two areas, this public can become sizeable. It may even become a significant proportion of the non-student public for sociology in later years.

Most likely, the non-student public can be divided by the usual sociological categories, class, age, gender and race among them, but it could also be classified by the audience categories used by publishers and other presenters and by the interests that attract it to sociological work.

For the purposes of this analysis, the distinction between the better and less educated general public will have to suffice. The better educated public consists mainly, but not

³ This public may also include some high school students, although their reading is usually limited to textbooks.

exclusively, of people who have graduated from reasonably selective colleges. Many read elite or watch elite news media, the so-called general class magazines, such as *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *Harper's* and the political journals of opinion, as well as more narrowly targeted publications.

This public is also a significant audience for other media, such as public television, documentaries, "serious" books and "art movies." In recent decades its members have clicked on websites and social media that seek to attract the better educated public.

The less educated public includes the rest of the population and the myriad of communication outlets that serve it, and it was once described as a mass audience and studied as mass communication.

The so-called mass audience is hardest to reach, partially because it has often obtained only rudimentary instruction in social studies, but also because many sociologists are not trained to reach it. Status differences create yet further communication obstacles. Writing and creating content for this set of publics requires special skills that sociologists often lack. Consequently, most sociology that reaches this public takes the form of journalistic summaries.

Until some qualitative audience research is undertaken, one can only guess at what sociological topics interest these two publics and thus have the potential for becoming public sociology. The safest hypothesis holds that most people in both publics will be primarily interested in sociology that tells them something that affects them directly or is personally relevant or useful to their well being and their everyday lives.

These publics may also be interested in sociology that helps them understand significant current events, especially dramatic and traumatic ones such as wars, disasters and economic crises and also what sociologists call social problems. Sometimes sociological analyses that question the conventional wisdom or are otherwise counter intuitive will find an audience, as will analyses of trivial or frivolous matters.

Qualitative empirical studies, especially those using fieldwork and intensive interviewing are apt to be popular, particularly if these include a fair amount of narrative and attention-getting example. Journalists may be attracted to them because they lend themselves to personalized case studies.

Systematic research to determine whether and how sociological work reaches the general public and gains sufficient serious attention for that work to become public sociology is difficult. Audience research for the traditional media is expensive and mostly collects data useful in the selling of advertisements and commercials.

Audience researchers in the digital media can count how many people click on an item and how much time they spend with it, which is the current proxy for serious attention. As traditional and digital media continue to combine, that proxy or an improved version may provide more information about what the several publics will accept or might become interested in. Until then, it would be wise not to overestimate their numbers.

Determining what attracts the general public can be aided by the recognition that these interests do not exist in a vacuum. Nor does public sociology. A significant proportion of public interest in sociology is generated by dramatic events, changing

conditions and new problems as well as controversies in the larger society. Indeed, sociology often becomes public sociology because of dramatic changes in society.⁴

For example, studies in family sociology have often been turned into public sociology, but its amount increases when families are visibly changing or believed to be in trouble. Because everyone has some kind of family, many in the general public seek to understand these changes, which then leads journalists and others to start writing about them, and to consult family sociologists in the process. At first, these may be asked only to supply information and quotes, but a likely end result is new public sociology about the changing American family.

In short, the ultimate origin of most public sociology can be found in social change. Unchanging conditions are more likely to wind up in textbooks.

The Presenters

However essential the general public is to the creation of public sociology, it could not come about without the presenters. They offer sociologists the only access to the non-student public, and they must be considered as one of the sufficient causes of public sociology's existence.

Thus, the process by which sociology turns public must begin by attracting the attention of the presenters, whose job it is to sell their symbolic wares to one or more publics.

Consequently, sociologists must understand how presenters make indirect and direct contact with their publics and when and why they try to present a sociological product as public sociology. Although some presenters keep in touch with a number of sociologists, others wait until they learn about something that calls for a sociologist.

Presenters come in several varieties. The first and often initial presenters are teachers who assign sociological readings and now various digital products, some of which may have already attracted a general public.

A second set consists primarily of journalists and their editors as well as columnists, op-ed writers, book reviewers and the like. The journalists are likely to be beat reporters who cover a social science, culture or lifestyle beat. They may also be free lancers who write about or draw on sociology and the social sciences for their work.

Individual journalists who write stories about a sociological study or other work make it visible to other journalists, but for sociology to become public sociology, numbers count. Thus, if enough other journalists find the initial story interesting and go on to do their own reporting and stories, they arouse the suspicion that their audiences are also interested, and then the sociological work becomes a candidate to become public sociology.

Most of the journalistic presenters still work for newspapers or magazines and their websites. Increasingly, they also staff independent news websites that rely particularly

⁴ Someday, a historian of public sociology might be able to figure out what conditions in American society, or the discipline, contributed to Burawoy's success in introducing the idea.

Over the years, other ASA presidents have made related proposals in their presidential addresses (see e.g., Hughes 1963, p. 890). My own presidential address was entitled "The Discipline and the Public" and I even mentioned public sociology in passing (Gans 1989) but it generated virtually no interest in the discipline. The time did not ripen until Michael Burawoy went to work.

on features which analyze the news and are therefore potential sites for public sociology.

Many other websites present what journalists call long form text on subjects also studied by sociologists, and now some are offering professionally created videos that accompany or replace website text. Some sociologists already make such videos and those that attain a reasonably sized audience on YouTube and its peers may become the latest outlet for public sociology.

Print and other journalism has long been losing readers and is now engaged in a systematic and sometimes frantic search for new ways to present, package and enrich the news. For researchers, the most significant innovation is probably data driven or evidence based journalism, sometimes also called explainer journalism, which supplements the news with social science research or analyses of relevant data bases. One very visible current example may be “The Upshot” columns of the *New York Times* which appear almost every day.

A third set of presenters is associated with book publishing in its print and e-book forms, especially firms which mainly publish so called trade books. Still, academic presses that discover one of their books is selling an unusually high number of copies can turn it into a trade book, or sell the paperback edition to a trade book publisher. Thus, even a scholarly monograph can sometimes become public sociology.

A fourth set of presenters can be found in the world of electronic media which still attract comparatively huge audiences even if fewer than in the pre-digital past. Radio and television rarely present lengthy analyses, other than in documentaries, and only a few movies have ever been made by sociologists, or from books and other kinds of sociological work.

A fifth set of presenters is emerging in the world of the social media, such as Facebook and its competitors. They are the audience members of social media sites, and like the opinion leaders of old (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955), they occasionally discover a sociological book, article or other product and tell their friends and followers about it.

In addition, the major social media and search engines are now beginning to provide news of various kinds, and while not much sociology is likely to wind up in such news outlets, the social media audience is humongous. Consequently, any sociological product that is summarized or even mentioned in social media thereby has a chance of becoming public sociology.

All the presenters aim to adapt sociological work prepared for the discipline to their audience in the general public. In the process, they summarize, simplify and sometimes dramatize the work to increase its attractiveness to the public. At times, they may also misinterpret or misrepresent it, either unintentionally or by hyping it to make it yet more saleable.

The presenters will express their enthusiasm for the work, especially if the findings are new, dramatic, controversial, or contribute to current public discussions. That enthusiasm may encourage other presenters to pay attention, and if they are also enthusiastic as well, the work will be on its way toward the general public.

For example, a publisher or two might become interested; or if the book is already available, sales could increase significantly. Alternatively, a magazine could commission a longish article or television producers might propose a possible documentary. Every so often, there may even be talk of a movie, although most such costly forms of public sociology never become a reality.

Meanwhile, reports on the sociological product will also join the never ending public “chatter” known as word of mouth and its digital equivalents in the social media. Then the sociologist’s work would join what is sometimes called the national conversation, and the digital word of mouth could even “go viral.”

However, the presenters’ initial enthusiasm may never spread beyond them, and then the sociological work will not reach the general public. If the presenters’ initial efforts result in at some publicly visible evidence, and the *Zeitgeist* is willing, it might end up as public sociology at a later time.

Sociology and Journalism

Journalists, whether reporters, writers, editors or columnists or commentators are the most essential presenters, and therefore require further discussion. Among them, beat reporters and free lance writers who cover the social sciences may be the most likely candidates to initiate the process by which sociology becomes public sociology.

Some of these journalists may also keep up with academic journals to see if any articles might interest their audiences. They also maintain contact with a handful of academic and related sources to determine whether ongoing or completed research might turn into an article. Sometimes, their reporting informs or persuades publishers of sociological books to market some as the trade books that have the best chance of becoming public sociology.

Although social science beat reporters or writers are few in number, they are now being joined by some of the previously mentioned data or evidence driven journalists who scour academic journals and data bases that could be turned into stories that might interest their audiences. They frequently report survey findings, and they appear to be fond of experiments, in part because these sometimes come up with counter intuitive findings or lend themselves to interesting narrative.

The importance of journalists for public sociology justifies a closer relationship of journalism and sociology. The two disciplines both study society and because they are thought to compete, they have traditionally been excessively adversarial. Sociologists have looked down on journalists, dismissing their work as oversimplified if not wrongheaded. Journalists in turn dismiss academic research for its abstractness, technical language, and its unwillingness to report to the general public.

Perhaps because the two disciplines differ in the institutional contexts in which they work, the kinds of audiences they seek to reach, the time they have for research (or legwork as the journalists call it) and the time and space they are given for presenting their findings, they also have something to learn from each other.

Journalists could therefore teach sociologists interested in having their work become public sociology how to be topical and more sensitive to current events and audience concerns. They can also teach us to write in clear, simple, and parsimonious English, and to better exploit the various communication outlets available via cyberspace and the internet.

Conversely, sociologists could teach journalists about research methods and data analysis, relevant epistemological issues, the usefulness of concepts and the pitfalls of simplification. They could also help journalists delve into the contexts in which the subjects of their stories are embedded.

All this is easier to propose than to practice, since the conditions under which journalists and sociologists work are so different that the virtues of one discipline are often impractical for the other.

Becoming a Public Sociologist

Sociologists whose research and writing are frequently turned into public sociology may be invited to become public sociologists, writing op-eds and articles or supplying frequent quotes about subjects in their fields. They will also be asked to write about fields other than their own. At times, they may even be asked for opinions about subjects having little or nothing to do with sociology.

Some journalists have assembled a stable of already known sociologists who can be quickly called on for comments. These calls can become more frequent the more readily and quickly sociologists can make themselves available and the more public attention their quotes and soundbites receive.

So far, not many sociologists have become regularly appearing public sociologists, most likely because they have not been invited. Still, we do not know how many would want to enter that role. While it provides the chance to reach large audiences regularly, as well as the visibility and the few minutes of fame accompanying it, moving away from one's academic research can result in marginalization and rejection by colleagues.⁵ Sometimes, researchers who try to reach out to the general public above all can forget that they must also continue to reach out to their colleagues.

Conclusion

Sociologists do not often study their own discipline (other than its history), but if public sociology is to flourish, they must learn more about the publics they reach, do not reach and would like to reach. They must also learn more about the role presenters play in the creation of public sociology.

Perhaps most important, sociologists, particularly sociologists of knowledge need to explore the societal conditions that generate questions for and that could generate interest in public sociology.

Indeed, public sociology should already be flourishing, given the country's many social, economic, political and other problems. Sociology being the discipline that pays most empirical attention to the general public, studies of how exactly it is affected by and reacts to these problems would be especially valuable. Such studies would also be likely candidates for becoming public sociology.

Actually, public sociology *must* flourish, for the discipline needs a larger and friendlier general public to provide support. We can use such support to obtain government and foundation funding for research - and to prevent cuts in funding by conservative forces seeking to restrict what sociology can study.

⁵ Conversely, university administrations encourage public social scientists because they provide public evidence demonstrating the university's dedication to useful scholarship and public service.

Public sociology must also flourish to enable the discipline to compete with other social sciences, particularly behavioral and institutional economists who are currently doing research on topics that are traditionally sociological ones.

Increased competition can be expected as well from the rising number of journalists who have studied sociology, and can write more quickly and clearly than we about sociological topics. Their data driven colleagues might even decide one day that they can analyze and even generate newsworthy data without help from academics, including sociologists.

Ultimately, however, public sociology must also flourish for what it can contribute to the vitality of the discipline. By paying greater attention to current events, topical issues and policy-related research questions, it can compensate for the tendency of academic scholars, in all fields, to devote themselves primarily to their disciplinary agendas.

However, all of this can happen only if the discipline values public sociology sufficiently to offer incentives and rewards similar to those offered to basic researchers. In addition, academic curricula and infrastructures need to provide training for and encouragement to students to undertake research on topics that can result in public sociological products. Perhaps then, sociology could more often be valued for contributing knowledge to society rather than just to “the literature.”

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