



Advancing Public Knowledge(s)
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While at the Ford Foundation (2004-2007), I was required to develop a grant making strategy for my portfolio of Education and Scholarship. My initiative was entitled "Advancing Public Knowledge(s)."

For the last decade at least, journalists and scholars have noted the increased savvy among conservatives to engage the public in their dissemination of information and in mobilizing them around key issues. If we bother to analyze the strategies of Conservatives instead of reacting to them, we might derive some benefit from their best practices. More than anything, they have shown that when the public is engaged, their voices are powerful and their actions impressive. On the other side of coin, we continue to lament the inability of progressives and scholars to "speak to the people." Even the most erudite scholar is too often accused of using coded language and speaking to audiences that consist of those just like her. Feminists and non-majority scholars have breached this somewhat by donning the hat of "public intellectuals," but their impact remains unexamined.

Several grants currently in my active portfolio have framed their activities as those that will produce public knowledge. Immediately two questions emerge: who is the public, and what type of knowledge will you provide them? Unfortunately, all too frequently, grantees are unable to answer these satisfactorily. For most, the public are colleagues outside their disciplinary field, but still in the academy; and the type of knowledge produced seems limited, and appeals only to a small segment of the public.

Most program officers who work in areas other than media frequently talk about dissemination, but rarely do we have specific strategies to accomplish it. As a result, we are unable to aptly guide our grantees.

This future initiative of advancing public knowledge(s) is predicated on several assumptions:

- To build support for new ideas and innovations related to inclusion and diversity, academic knowledge(s) must travel across the immense divide of refereed scholarship into public scholarship
- Such traveling requires different writing styles and varied approaches to appropriate dissemination
- Scholars who travel into the public arena are not rewarded, and often dismissed
- Good content does not necessarily produce good public knowledge(s)
- Academic knowledge production requires translation into styles and information that is easily understood, can persuade or influence, and may be utilized in the public arena of policy
- Writing is not the only means of communication