

What are some of the (out of the box) approaches/ channels/ platforms that scholars can use to link / channel their work to activism / activist causes?

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1. Background

“Of the 1%, By the 1%, for the 1%” is an iconic essay written by the Nobel Winning Economist, Joseph Stiglitz, and published on Vanity Fair Magazine, on the growing economic inequality in the US, where the one top 1% of the richest people’s incomes had grown in outsize proportions as compared to middle class Americans¹. This essay was based on several academic research papers that had highlighted this issue over the years, and more importantly, came at a time when the Occupy Wall Street movement was gaining momentum. In essence, the term 1% has become quite colloquial, especially in social movements and campaigns to address economic and social injustice.

Coincidentally, a US Congress Budget Office report validated these concerns of growing economic inequality, thus strengthening the core argument of the Occupy Movement. The findings of this report were summarised in a popular Tumblr blog, which in essence took the message to the wider public audience. The Occupy protestors termed themselves as the other 99%.

This seemingly simple example is a poignant illustration of the confluence of scholarship and activism, one that is gaining much momentum in different forums². More important is the markedly different nature of many of the modern day scholar-activist campaigns as compared and contrasted to similar campaigns earlier on, such as the divestment movement against Apartheid South Africa. But nowhere is this difference more pronounced than in the approaches, channels and platforms used to run and grow the modern day scholar-activist initiatives. This in essence brings us to the question at the heart of this report:

“What are some of the (out of the box) approaches/ channels/ platforms that scholars can use to link / channel their work to activism / activist causes?”

This report draws on conversations during the STEPS Summer School 2016, open group discussions focused on the question at hand, and broader reflections on which platforms/channels/approaches have been instrumental in fostering the scholar-activist nexus.

This is one of a series of reports on the relationship between research and activism, produced following the ESRC STEPS Centre Summer School 2016. It informs and is part of a web-based resource on research-activist links. We are grateful to the [Fondation Charles Léopold Mayer pour le Progrès de l’Homme \(FPH\)](#) for their support of this initiative.

Visit the website: learning.steps-centre.org

¹ <http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2011/05/top-one-percent-201105>

² Dreher et al. (2013). Combining academia and activism Common obstacles and useful tools. Australian Universities Review. 55(1). Available [here](#)

2. Key Issues

'It's the social networks, stupid!'

'Measuring impact' is undoubtedly one of the keywords currently doing rounds in academic research. As much as it has been a lively debate, entertaining various ways of measuring impact such as journal articles metrics and making academic materials more widely available, e.g through open source publication options, some (out of the box) ways of generating impact have from scholarship have been relegated to the fringes of the discussion. However, contrary to their treatment, these 'out-of-the-box;' approaches have proven to be fundamentally transformative.

We are now in the Information Age, where information flows in realtime from one end of the world to the other. This era has also ushered in social networks, especially in the digital realm, thus leveraging on the power of networked individuals to bring about change. This section explores these channels and platforms and highlights how they have brought forth transformative change and fostered the scholar-activist nexus.

2.1 Social media

Social media has no doubt fuelled many activist movements, from the Arab Spring to the spread of the Occupy Movement and Black Lives Matter, among others. This has been mainly through Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. The social media platform enables individuals/groups to create their own content and instantly share it with the wider public in a scale and instantaneous manner that was not possible before the advent of social media.

One common way of getting key messages from scholarship to the wider public audience via social media has been through the use of infographics.

PULLING APART

INCOME INEQUALITY HAS GROWN IN UNITED STATES

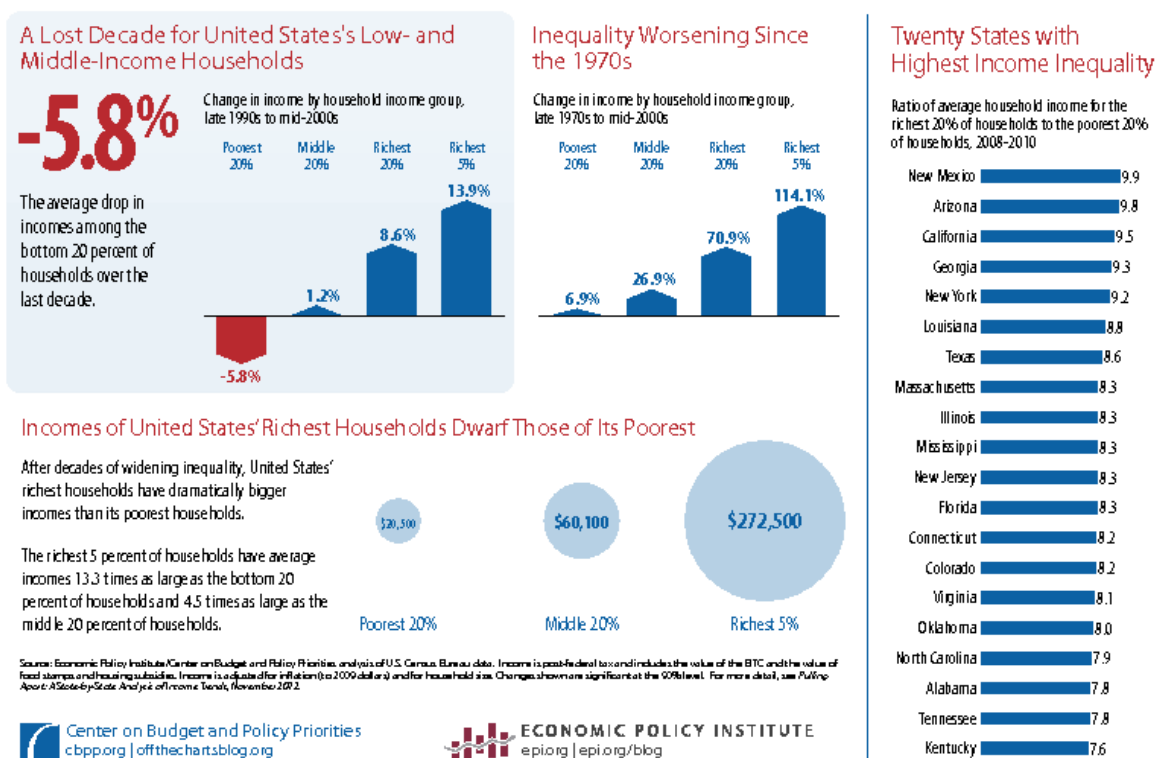


Figure 1: Income inequality in the US. Infographics can summarise an entire paper/research with greater impact on public opinion and readability

2.2 Blogs

Blogs have also emerged as an important platform for scholars to share their work to the general public and making it more 'palatable' to people without academic orientation, e.g the general public and activists.

In 2013, two young economists from the University of Manchester, Fredi de Ville, and Gabriel Siles-Brügge wrote a blog article on their new research findings that the much touted Transatlantic Trade and Investment partnership (TTIP) did not in essence have the potential to deliver the benefits that the countries' involved had promised³. While they would have traditionally written a scientific paper, they opted instead to share their findings in the form of a blog post that is easily available to the public⁴. The blog post went viral and ignited and formed the basis of social movements aimed at stopping the TTIP⁵, as well as earning the scholars meeting with key public officials.

³ <http://blog.policy.manchester.ac.uk/featured/2013/12/the-false-promise-of-eu-us-trade-talks/>

⁴ A video summarising this feat (also presented at STEPS Summer School) can be viewed here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kLPBTn4TKjI>

⁵ See for instance the Stop TTIP Movement, comprised of more than 500 European organisations aimed at stopping TTIP and similar trade deals <https://stop-ttip.org/>

Tumblr, a popular blogging platform, has also emerged as a central online tool especially for the Occupy Movement. A Tumblr blog post titled 'We are the 99%' brought much impetus to the Occupy movement, since the latter adopted the title of the blogpost as the movement's slogan⁶.

These examples clearly illustrates how scholars can channel their research through innovative platforms such as blogs to reach to the wider audience and create greater and more immediate impact with their work. More importantly, the messages on these platforms were based on scientific work, some of it dating back many years and decades.

2.3 Public Open Spaces

Public open spaces provide an avenue for scientists and scholars to share and demonstrate their research to the broader public audience.

2.4 Bright Clubs

Simply put, Bright Clubs are stand-up comedies that seek to convey important scientific information and knowledge through humour. This innovative form of communication research has been gaining much momentum and credence, with these Clubs becoming an important avenue for scholars to convey their research in an unconventional way. The concept of Bright Clubs started off as an experiment, and has since established itself as an effective communication platforms for scholars⁷. Getting activists to Bright Clubs does balance the other side of the scholar-activist equation.

2.5 Including social movements & CSOs in workshops

This suggestion was made by one of the participants in the open table discussions at STEPS, and focused on broadening the scope of participants in some of the academic workshops that seek to have an impact. This would facilitate useful exchanges between scholars and activists, and also challenge of their views and opinions.

2.6 Open Science

Through the open science approach, citizens get engaged in designing certain aspects of scholarly research. This can range from citizens co-designing research questions, discussing findings and writing conclusions to scholarly work, as well as bringing together people with different talents to engage in scholarly work, such as Do-It-Yourself (DIY) labs.

Open Science initiatives have also involved leveraging on scholarship and research to advance certain advocacy objectives of activists, such as in developing safe online communication channels for activists to run their campaigns and coordinate⁸. The SecureDrop Server is a secure online tool developed by cybersecurity researchers to enable journalists to share messages and files especially on sensitive issues of great public interest⁹. BitCoin is also an excellent example of

⁶ <http://wearethe99percent.tumblr.com/>

⁷ See a brief history of Bright Clubs here <https://brightclub.wordpress.com/about/>

⁸ A list of some open source tools that support eActivism
http://partnerships.typepad.com/civic/2004/01/top_10_open_sou.html

⁹ <https://theintercept.com/staff/>

how the wider public comprising of researchers, programmers, and activists have come together to develop tools to address issues of they care about especially as regards finance¹⁰.

2.7 High School Talks

High school talks were also identified as being key to assist researchers and scholars to communicate their work to a wider audience. One of the participants shared some experiences from their involvement in communicating their research work to high school students, who were quite eager to take up some of the issues presented and advocate for solutions. The energy and idealism of young people was identified as key to their synthesis and utilisation of scholarship to advance issues they care about.

2.8 Public Dialogues

Public dialogues seek to engage the public in debates and discussions about crucial public policy issues, with a view to integrate the citizens' views and preferences on such issues. The Research Councils for UK for instance conducted a public dialogue to elicit citizens' views and preferences on energy research priorities¹¹. Scholars can take this opportunity to communicate their research in a manner that resonates clearly with the public so as to enable the latter to be aware of their research and its relevance to the public dialogues.

2.9 Teach-ins

Teach-ins have played an important role in bringing together scholars and activists. Throughout major protests the world over, teach-ins have been used as an important platform to advance scholastic and moral ideas that underpinned the protests. The teach-ins organised in opposition to the Vietnam War are one poignant example of bridging the scholar-activist gap¹². The University Teach-ins and seat-ins at the University of California at Berkley were instrumental in driving the divestment campaigns against apartheid South Africa¹³.

2.10 YouTube Science Shows

While YouTube has brought forth music superstars such as teenage heart throb Justin Beiber, it is also proving to be an important platform to foster the scholar-activism nexus. Sci Show is for instance one of the most prominent YouTube Channels that seeks to bring science to the general public; it currently has a subscription of more than 3.5 million users¹⁴.

2.11 Activist demonstrations

Embedding researchers in demonstrations can add impetus to activist social movements. The Keystone XL is one excellent example of how prominent scientists such as NASA's James Hansen, joined protestors to demand the US administration not to permit the construction of the Keystone XL pipeline that was to transport crude fossil fuel from Canada's Alberta Tar Sands to the US Gulf

¹⁰ <http://www.coindesk.com/information/what-is-bitcoin/>

¹¹ The full report is available here <https://www.epsrc.ac.uk/newsevents/pubs/energy-research-dialogue-a-public-dialogue-on-uk-energy-research-priorities-final-report/>

¹² <http://crooksandliars.com/gordonskene/may-15-1965-vietnam-war-teach>

¹³ <http://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/university-california-berkeley-students-win-divestment-against-apartheid-south-africa-1985>

¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/user/scishow> . A list of other top science shows can be found here <http://www.geekwrapped.com/posts/youtube-science-rockstars-shows>

of Mexico for export¹⁵. This presence of Dr. Hansen, a pioneer in climate modelling, undoubtedly added significant impetus to the Stop Keystone XL movement by underscoring the scientific consensus on keeping such dirty fuels in the ground. Academic staff were also instrumental in successfully advocating for the University of Glasgow to fully divest its investments from fossil fuels, as an important moral imperative to address global warming¹⁶. The University of Glasgow thus became the first university in Europe to divest from fossil fuels¹⁷. This movement that started on university campuses has caught on and many other public and private institutions have committed to divest from fossil fuels; even cities¹⁸!

2.12 New Journal Formats

The push to broaden the scope of scientific research beyond conventional research communities has seen the emergence of a new breed of journals focused on this issue. The Green European Journal is an excellent example of how to bridge the scholar-activist gap, by focusing on publishing articles from both scholars and activists, but focusing more on the activist elements of the articles¹⁹.

In sum, numerous (unconventional) approaches/channels/platforms are emerging with a view to bridge and foster the scholar-activist nexus, and it is important especially of scholars to be aware and make good use of these emerging platforms in order to advance their work and create greater impact.

3. Useful resources

This section presents some useful (but not exhaustive) papers and reports focused on scholar-activism. Some useful resources have been embedded in the preceding text.

- **Social media**
 - Shriky, C. (2011). The Political Power of Social Media. Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change. *Foreign Affairs*. Available [here](#)
 - Carrol, W. & Hackett, R. (2006). Democratic media activism through the lens of social movement theory. *Media, Culture and Society*. 21(8). Available [here](#)
 - Cox, L. (2015). Scholarship and Activism. A Social Movements Perspective. *Studies in Social Justice*. 9(1). Available [here](#)
 - Daniels, J. & Feagin, J. (2011). The (Coming) Social Media Revolution in the Academy. *Fast Capitalism*. Available [here](#)
- **Blogs**
 - Barlow, A. (2015). Scholar Activism as Practise. Academic Blog. The Blog of Academe Magazine. Available [here](#)

¹⁵ <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2011/06/05/236978/james-hansen-keystone-pipeline-tar-sands-climate/>

¹⁶

¹⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/oct/08/glasgow-becomes-first-university-in-europe-to-divest-from-fossil-fuels>

¹⁸ See a comprehensive list of institutions that have committed to divest from fossil fuels <http://gofossilfree.org/commitments/>

¹⁹ This journal is focused on timely debates in Europe, and it advances the philosophies of the European Green Movement <http://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/about/>

- Grollman, E. (2014). Toward A self-Defined Activist-Academic Career in Sociology. *Conditionally Accepted*. Available [here](#)
- Kweder, M. (2014). Why I'm not waiting for tenure to change the world. *Conditionally Accepted*. Available [here](#)
- Peters, R. (2015). Are Scholar-Activists Welcome in the Academy? Feminist Studies in Religion. Available [here](#)
- **Public open spaces**
- **Bright clubs**
- **Including social movements & CSOs in workshops**
- **Open Science**
 - McKiernan, E. (2013). Activism or Science? A Debate on Open Access. Available [here](#)
 - Dosemagen, S. (2015). Open Science and the environmental movement. Available [here](#)
 - Grossman, W. (2015). Digital Activist's Suicide Casts Spotlight on Growth of Open-Access Movement. *Scientific America*. Available [here](#)
 - Simmons, D. (2016). From Politics of Science to Evidence-Based Activism. Available [here](#)
 - Austen, K. (2014). Festival shows the promise and perils of open data. *New Scientist*. Available [here](#)
- **High School Talks**
- **Public Dialogues**
 - Review of Research Councils UK Public Dialogues – background. Available [here](#)
 - Rowe, G. & Frewer, L. (2004). Evaluating Public Participation Exercises: A Research Agenda. *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, Vol. 29 No. 4, Autumn 2004 512-556. Available [here](#)
 - Nature (2006). Despite enthusiasm for the concept, open peer review was not widely popular, either among authors or by scientists invited to comment. Available [here](#)
 - Bonney, R., Ballard, H., Jordan, R., McCallie, E., Phillips, T., Shirk, J., and Wilderman, C. C. 2009. Public Participation in Scientific Research: Defining the Field and Assessing Its Potential for Informal Science Education. A CAISE Inquiry Group Report. Washington, D.C.: Center for Advancement of Informal Science Education (CAISE). Available [here](#)
- **Teach-ins/bike-ins**
 - Masahiro, W. (2014). The Sunflower Movement and the Emergence of a “New Mass” in Taiwan. *Nippon*. Available [here](#)
 - Ho, M. (2015). The Sunflower Movement and Taiwan’s Embattled Sociology. *Global Dialogue*. 5(4). Available [here](#)
 - Horton, D. (2009). Social Movements and the Bicycle. *Thinking About Cycling*. Available [here](#)
 - Manski, B. (2015). 50 years: The roots of the next major teach-in wave. *Next Systems Project*. Available [here](#)
 - Schugurensky, D. (2007). First "teach-in" held at University of Michigan: New tool for public education is born. *History of Education*. Available [here](#)
- **YouTube Science Shows**

- McKelvey, C. (2015). The 12 best science shows on YouTube. The Daily Dot. Available [here](#)
- Science and Education YouTube Channels. Available [here](#)
- ***Activist Demonstrations***
- ***New Journal Formats***
 - The Green European Journal. Available [here](#)
 - Interface: A journal for and about social movements. Available [here](#)

5. Key organisations / networks

This section provides a listing of organisations/networks that foster scholar activism.

- International Network of Scholar Activists. Accessible [here](#)
- Resistance Studies Network. Accessible [here](#)
- National Film Network (The Making of a Scholar/Activist. Accessible [here](#)
- Scholar Activist Project Awards. Accessible [here](#)
- Progressive Radio Network (Scholar Activist). Accessible [here](#)
- Scholars Strategy Network. Accessible [here](#)
- National Association of Scholars. Accessible [here](#)

6. Open questions

Some open questions to open up this discussion further include:

- What are some of the emerging platforms that have huge potential to foster scholar-activism?
- Do some activism platforms dent the credibility of scholars using them to share their research?
- Would it be better to try to open up 'traditional' scholarship platforms to embrace some flexibility such as activism?

7. Concluding remarks

Scholar-activism is an important avenue for scholars to link their research to public causes. Different platforms have fostered the scholarship-activism nexus, from 'old' conventional methods such as teach-ins in anti-war protests, to leveraging social media platforms to bring forth important research to the public attention and psyche. Thus scholar-activists should 'open up' to the various platforms available to them, and emerging platforms as well, to further and improve the impact of the research to support public causes.