



International Journal of
Gender, Science and Technology

<http://genderandset.open.ac.uk>

Review of *Scientists, Experts, and Civic Engagement: Walking a Fine Line* edited by Amy E. Lesen

**Reviewed by
Martha McCaughey**

Appalachian State University, USA

PUBLICATION DETAILS

Date: 2015

Published by: Ashgate Publishing, Burlington, VT

ISBN: 9781472415240

REVIEW

Academic professionals, departments, professional associations, funding agencies, and even entire universities increasingly champion engaged scholarship, which is sometimes also called public scholarship, applied research, or participatory action research. Readers of *Scientists, Experts, and Civic Engagement* will gain clarity on what “engaged scholarship” looks and feels like and find some insightful distinctions between scholarship and politics. All those who call themselves “activist scholars” or “activist teachers” ought to read this book for reasons why they should be more careful in their language, thinking, and work. For if our scholarship is tainted with politics it can no longer serve as credible expertise upon which solutions to social problems can be built or communities can be served, and therein lies a serious tension or “fine line.”

This volume was sparked by an NSF-funded 2010 symposium on scientists, experts, and civic engagement. The collection of essays, which is not limited to scientists, invites us to consider the “fine line” scholars walk when positioning their scholarship as *engaged*. These lively and candid reflections by scholars who “step out of the academy and into the civic arena” (p. xv) provide from-the-trenches insights into negotiating relationships variously with the public, the media, policy makers, elected officials, and even one’s own colleagues and research participants. In so doing, this volume enriches discussions of the rights and responsibilities of scholars today—discussions that too often naively see scholarship as either divorced from social needs or, at the other extreme, as a form of politics.

This journal uses Open Journal Systems 2.4.8.1, which is open source journal management and publishing software developed, supported, and freely distributed by the [Public Knowledge Project](#) under the GNU General Public License.



The lead chapter, by geographer Richard Campanella, describes how the 2005 crisis of Hurricane Katrina prompted him to start writing Op Eds and articles for a Louisiana architectural preservation magazine on rebuilding New Orleans and other civically relevant topics in his field. Campanella advises readers to “opine only when you have new data, insights, or perspectives to contribute to the discussion at hand” (p. 7). Campanella readily admits that his engagement did not just benefit the public; it also increased his book sales. Campanella’s tales of journalists trying to parlay his research into a political statement remind readers that trying to keep one’s scholarship out of politics requires vigilance. Journalists are not the only challenge for the engaged scholar, for unhappy members of the public can “engage right back and sneer at your presumed expertise—all to be preserved forever on the Internet. . .” (p. 11). Members of the public can also over-rely on an engaged scholar, and Campanella outlines the care he has had to take not to give political opinions, or even academic statements, that fall outside his area of expertise.

The volume not only provides cautionary tales from engaged scholars; it also helpfully situates longstanding debates about how scholarly research and engaged teaching can benefit students and the public. Chapters by Amy Koritz and Margaret Molly Olsen describe teaching students through community service projects, something recognized as a high-impact practice and aligned with campus mission statements—but not always with a professor’s discipline, department, or course design. Koritz does not explore the downside to her assertion that acting on feelings of responsibility to the community should not be optional, but central, for liberal arts professors, but certainly pushes readers to explore the downside to any claim that scholars ought *not* to be actively engaged with being socially beneficial. The downside of *disengagement* is to approach students as future Nobel Prize winners rather than science-using citizens and to rob students of opportunities to connect their learning to social and political contexts. Olsen champions creative pedagogical practices that incorporate civic engagement for humanities students; these are not simple but can be a “fruitful complexity” (p. 29). Stephanie Tremaine takes this a step further to ask how universities can make good on their commitments to act in the public interest by describing a campus-high school partnership in New Orleans, also sparked by Katrina’s devastation, that enrolled community members at Bard College. When Universities champion and model (but do not force) engagement, students can connect their intellectual pursuits (learning) with the public good (service).

Chapters by Janice Cumberbatch, Kristina J. Peterson, and Albert Naquin, et al describe the “how” rather than the “why” of engaged scholarship. Cumberbatch offers a schema for types of participation from community members—something often encouraged, but left ambiguous, by universities and funding agencies. Cumberbatch’s checklists on potential participants, implementors, resources, funders, and type of project will help engaged scholars design effective participatory projects. Peterson describes the inclusion of community members as partners in her participatory action research and, importantly, reminds readers that such work can burden rather than help communities if we do not take care to uphold the principles she outlines. This is perhaps the most controversial chapter of the volume because such embeddedness in communities, as Alice Dreger (2015) describes, can put the scholar in a pickle when their research suddenly appears counter to community members’ political interests and/or when it becomes unclear who the expert is. Chief Naquin’s chapter presents the view of a community member who reflects on what has and has not worked for his environmentally-ravaged community when scholars have attempted to serve or collaborate. Chief Naquin describes clashing agendas and how meaningful it would be

to have a scholar simply spend time listening and learning in his community—"see it and feel it and get dirty in it" (p. 107)—and then go on to help tell their story.

The volume's final chapter, by Amy E. Lesen, presents data on scientists' uses of Twitter to reach anyone who is not a practicing scientist. Such public engagement over social media is increasingly common among scientists. Those who've taken to Tweeting told Lesen that the form works for their public audience and they have more control over their message than when journalists or political pundits deliver it. Tweeting scientists have helped humanize scientists. Such methods, along with other creative efforts (see, e.g., the "Dance Your Ph.D." contest), engage the public in scientific research. These efforts to engage the public remind us that control and access to scientific work are changing, and not always for the better. As Lesen explains, some scholars worry that the importance of peer evaluation will be weakened when the entire public sees itself as engaged with/in science or sees scientists as lacking a special authority.

The University of Virginia climate scientists whose emails were sought by the American Tradition Institute, trying to discredit them, offers a cautionary tale. The University, the Union of Concerned Scientists, the AAUP, and the Virginia Supreme Court argued that some degree of freedom from interference from outside groups was necessary in order for scientists to produce scholarship that would ultimately benefit the public good (*American Tradition Institute v. Rector, et al*, 2014). Climate scientists are but one group of scholars today who find themselves betwixt and between the distanced ivory tower and the political battleground.

The contributors to *Scientists, Experts, and Civic Engagement* offer a picture of proceeding with the utmost integrity, inviting readers to consider when engaged scholarship actually does cross that "fine line" between the academic enterprise's need to be independent of interference from government, corporate, or public-interest groups and the stated aim of many scholars and campuses to be of service.

REFERENCES

American Tradition Institute v. Rector & Visitors of the University of Virginia & Michael Mann. (Va. April 17, 2014). 287 Va. 330 Amicus Brief.

<https://www.aaup.org/brief/american-tradition-institute-v-rector-visitors-university-virginia-michael-mann-287-va-330-va> Accessed March 8, 2019.

Dance Your Ph.D. Contest. American Association for the Advancement of Science.

<http://gonzolabs.org/dance/> Accessed March 8, 2019.

Dreger, A. (2015) *Galileo's middle finger: Heretics, activists, and the search for justice in science*. New York: Penguin.