

## [Independent Bookstores in Intellectual Exchange](#)

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Guest post from [Feeding the Elephant: A Forum for Scholarly Communications](#).

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A guest post by Matt Grossman, director of Institute for Public Policy and Social Research at Michigan State University.

Academic scholarship has long been criticized for speaking to small insular audiences in impenetrable prose, but researchers are increasingly reaching larger public and practitioner audiences through popular media, including interpretations by reporters and activists as well as direct researcher engagement. As an author of five academic books with some crossover sales and an owner of an independent bookstore in Lansing, Michigan, called Hooked, I am excited by the opportunity to share research and academic commentary with wider audiences. In fact, that is one of the motivations behind Hooked, a combined bookstore, coffee shop, and wine bar that I started with my wife and fellow Michigan State University professor, Sarah Reckhow, in April 2022.

Hooked specializes in community events, such as author talks and book clubs, as well as tasting menus, such as wine, cheese, and coffee flights. It is designed to catalyze conversation and people's discovery of new interests, with ties to both intellectual life and Midwest urban living. It occupies 3,000 square feet of ground floor retail space in an apartment building near our campus along the main thoroughfare connecting the university with the state capitol. Before our opening, central Lansing had lost its major bookstore, as had downtown East Lansing. Another bookstore next to campus had been started by a professor but closed in the 1990s, which inspired us to bring back a contemporary version. We were also galvanized by a sabbatical trip to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where bookstores help connect the academic community to the larger Boston area with copious public events, and our graduate school time in Berkeley, California, where academic and popular bookstores were key places to gather and explore.

Our efforts to incorporate academic literature at Hooked are so far modest. We have a larger-than-normal collection of university press and popular nonfiction titles, and we place books that might not normally garner a lot of attention face-out on the shelves and on display tables. We purchased both older backlist academic titles and the newest releases from several large and small publishers, including our local presses, national academic presses, and intermediaries. We have invited professors for author events, held poetry readings, hosted student and faculty groups, and started book clubs. We have developed several regular customers interested in academic titles, science and social science books, and high culture, and we try to cater to their interests.

Our hopes for the future of Hooked are somewhat grander. We believe that many campus speakers who come to East Lansing would also be interested in promoting their books if given the opportunity, and we plan to collaborate with university event organizers. We also hope that academics will join us for a series where they highlight their favorite three books on a topic that may interest others in expert-guided, short-term book clubs. We also aim to be a hub for new faculty members, other

university employees, and graduate and undergraduate students interested in conversations that bridge academic and popular interests. We have found that people like to get together in person at Hooked, with limited draws for virtual events, but we know that pandemic concerns still keep some away.

We have faced some challenges that are relevant to not only booksellers, but also those pursuing scholarly work that they want to make available to a broader audience. In trying to stock academic titles at Hooked, we hit several roadblocks with university presses that are not accustomed to selling to independent bookstores. First, we have encountered some presses that do not know who their book store representative is (we found out later independently), do not know which of their titles have sold in bookstores, and do not have any guidance to help bookstores stock their titles. Second, putting in an order directly with an academic press often requires purchasing a lot of titles simultaneously to receive discount and shipping terms that enable the store to come close to breaking even, making the process more difficult. This is to some extent inevitable with less popular titles and smaller publishers, but was more difficult than we expected even with relatively large university publishers.

Third, many university presses do not sell their books through Ingram, the near-monopoly intermediary wholesaler for bookstores, on close-to-reasonable terms. In some cases, customers can find less expensive copies of these books than Hooked can. That means it can be infeasible for a small bookstore to stock them. We had originally planned to have a broader array of MSU faculty books, for example - even those that might not normally be stocked in bookstores - but found that we could not get many of the books without taking a significant loss. By comparison, we've had little trouble stocking works of fiction and memoirs by local authors publishing with small presses; they are excited for events and limited distribution. Many academic presses are set up mainly to sell to university libraries, having concluded that a broader market is unavailable. Not taking advantage of the few available options to expand the reach of academic work is a lost opportunity for authors and readers.

We also had hoped there would be more interaction by faculty wanting to tout their favorite books in their field in events, favorites lists, shelf talkers, or book clubs. We do have a large academic customer base, but academics are—like other readers—interested in entertaining fiction, books for their kids, and all kinds of other titles. On the positive side of our surprises, Hooked has quickly become a prominent space for writing groups and faculty-student interaction. Our customers get a lot of work done at Hooked, and we like to think it is a stimulating gathering space.

We are still working to enable academic learning and public conversation at Hooked, as we believe it is useful. Some scholars are less supportive of the need to translate research for popular audiences; the move from a shared academic language to popular parlance requires imprecision and often involves expanding inquiry well beyond academics' narrow specialized expertise. Recent controversies over the global historical claims made by scholars such as Steven Pinker, Francis Fukuyama, and Jared Diamond have centered on their claiming more than the evidence can support in service to a grand public narrative.

My own review of these developments (in my book, *How Social Science Got Better*) shows that interdisciplinary public debates, even with this kind of overclaiming, usually end up making

scholarship better. They bring diverse critics together to interpret the same evidence. Different disciplines and subfields bring distinct perspectives that often only come into contact when broad views are debated publicly. Practitioners and the general public raise their own questions, more closely scrutinize claims that are relevant to current social issues, and try to apply knowledge to real-world problems, forcing experts to respond while illustrating nuances and open questions. Many of those exchanges came not just from publishing, but from public talks and conversations.

Advancing knowledge through public debate may seem a grand ambition for a little bookstore. But we want to emphasize that public scholarship is important not only because it brings knowledge from the university to the public, but also because those public readers and listeners contribute to the knowledge generation process. Sharing our passions with a few members of the interested public can stimulate ideas. And academics also learn from popular press and crossover books and others' public talks. So I wish you informative and interesting reading, hopefully over coffee or wine.

**Matt Grossmann** is director of the Institute for Public Policy and Social Research and Professor of Political Science at Michigan State University. He is also senior fellow at the Niskanen Center and a contributor at FiveThirtyEight. He and Sarah Reckhow co-own *Hooked*, a bookstore, coffee shop, and wine bar in Lansing, Michigan. He has published analysis in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *Politico* and hosts the *Science of Politics* podcast. He is an author of many books, including *How Social Science Got Better*, *Asymmetric Politics*, *Red State Blues*, *The Not-So-Special Interests*, *Artists of the Possible*, and *Campaigns & Elections*, as well as dozens of journal articles.

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