

[Appreciating the Messy Process of the Public Humanities](#)

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

Note: This post grew out of a presentation the authors gave at the 2020 National Humanities Conference, and that presentation in turn grew out a working group on publishing publicly engaged humanities projects. A white paper on the topic will be published in spring 2021.

Guest post by Barry Goldenberg and Dave Tell

It would be an understatement to say that this has been a challenging year. Like most academics, the pandemic has also forced us to adjust to an almost fully-digital existence that has ruptured our normal work processes and daily interactions. It has all been a bit messy, to say the least. Yet, out of this messiness has also come new opportunities to experiment, such as in our pedagogy. If there is anything this past year has affirmed for us, it is that we should continue to embrace uncertainties in our processes.

This same principle should apply to our research. Unlike elementary algebra equations (or elementary social studies), in which all the variables are given in advance, scholarship in the humanities involves the gradual accumulation and gradual recognition of theretofore unknown variables. The more that research pushes beyond well-established domains (that is, the more generative that research becomes), the more the unknowns proliferate. And the more that variables proliferate, the more complex and messy scholarship becomes, too.

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Nowhere is this more true than in publicly engaged humanities research. In comparison to traditional humanities scholarship, public humanities involves methodological practices particularly prone to generate variables. Public humanities scholarship is often collaborative. This collaboration brings scholars from diverse institutional settings together (like us authors). It also brings scholars into local communities. And specific communities, no matter how homogenous they may appear, are best understood as variable multipliers. No matter how much advance reading is done or how much prior planning happens, the experience of being on-site in local communities always involves intellectual surprises (if it did not, it would not be worth doing). Local knowledges, local fault lines, local politics,

and local customs remake the assumptions of scholars at every turn. Ultimately, there must be “a necessary comfort with the unknown.”¹

The pandemic has only reaffirmed this belief that the messiness (or complexity) of public humanities scholarship is one of its virtues, and that publishing practices *should* render the messiness of the endeavor with as much clarity as possible.

In our own scholarship, we have often focused on the messy process of our work, and not just the final product. The pandemic has only reaffirmed this belief that the messiness (or complexity) of public humanities scholarship is one of its virtues, and that publishing practices *should* render the messiness of the endeavor with as much clarity as possible. It is indeed the messiness of public humanities scholarship that enables it to expand knowledge beyond previously-configured conclusions and to illuminate issues that plague all humanistic inquiry. This generative messiness demands malleable forms of dissemination that emphasize non-linear engagement, more open community collaboration, and process-focused scholarship.

When we presented these ideas at the National Humanities Conference (NHC) this past fall, our virtual conversations with other publicly engaged scholars centered around an important part of this work: the many unknowns. We each recognized the complexity of investigating unknown domains. Yet, we also talked about the benefits of embracing these unknowns in our research—not shunning them. While a complete list of unknown variables faced in public humanities scholarship is, by definition, unknown, there are a few categories we often encounter in our work:

- Unknown people (within and beyond university spaces) who make unpredictable contributions;
- Unknown “archives” (both traditional and untraditional) that alter the scope of a project;
- Unknown time commitments and length of a project;
- Unknown political environments that affect a project’s goals;
- Unknown effects of a collaboration, particularly in community spaces; and
- Unknown institutional barriers such as funding.

These unknowns are particularly heightened in (and perhaps after) a pandemic.

Rather than treat the proliferation of variables as an unfortunate methodological hurdle that can be overcome with rigor and written out of the final document, we believe that the *process (with all its messiness) should be reflected in the final product. Our published products should be designed in such a way as to document messiness rather than resolve messiness.*

While the above list may to some appear as a case against public humanities scholarship, we hold that the increased complexity/messiness of public humanities scholarship is one of its virtues. The more variables taken into account, the more valuable the scholarship. It is precisely the variables that allow for the expansion of knowledge beyond previously configured conclusions. And this expansive complexity should be reflected in what we publish, too. Rather than treat the proliferation of variables as an unfortunate methodological hurdle that can be overcome with rigor and written out of the final document, we believe that the *process (with all its messiness) should be reflected in the final product. Our published products should be designed in such a way as to document messiness rather than resolve messiness.* Documenting the impact of proliferating variables (in diverse forms in various fields) is a key part of the publishable contributions of publicly engaged scholarship.

The publicly engaged humanities work that we have engaged in reflects this belief of challenging the distinction between process and product. For example, consider the [Emmett Till Memory Project](#), a mobile application that one of us (Dave) designed to capture local histories of the 1955 murder of Emmett Till in the Mississippi Delta. There are many contested “truths” about the account of murder. Different communities in the Mississippi Delta remembered the story differently. Even answers to the most basic questions about the murder (like the number of accomplices, or the site of the murder) shift as one moves from community to community in the Delta. Convinced that a single account, regardless of its veracity, would sweep under the rug the story’s messiness, the ETMP chose to incorporate the complexity into its very design. With the affordances of GPS technology, the ETMP calibrates the story of the murder to a user’s location in the Mississippi Delta. For example, a user standing at the trial site will get the jury’s version of the story, while a user standing at the site where the black press lodged will get their version of the story. As the user moves, the story shifts. And as the story shifts, the user is confronted with the messiness of the story as it exists in the Mississippi Delta.

Or, for example, consider another one of our projects (Barry’s) called Youth Historians in Harlem (YHH) (currently housed by the [Harlem History Education Project](#)). YHH is a collaborative public history project between faculty, graduate students, and young people that has resulted in Omeka exhibits, walking tours, and community presentations on the history of education. However, in addition to these outputs, it has prioritized [documenting the unknowns in group community-based research](#). Without documenting the granular processes of how these groups worked together, it

would be impossible to fully grasp the significance of the collaboration or the potential community impact of the disseminated scholarship.

In both of our projects, *the messiness of the process is foregrounded in the final product*. This was by design. Without being able to engage the many variables, the user (or reader) will be unable to judge whether the outputs are in fact appropriate conclusions. By foregrounding the messiness of research, each of these projects increases the agency of the user, who is confronted with options rather than a prematurely settled account, and encouraged to consider their own potential contributions. This is the promise of embracing the messy processes of publicly engaged scholarship. Just as this messiness benefits knowledge consumers, it also benefits us as knowledge creators by opening new avenues of inquiry. As we all try to navigate what a post-pandemic world might be, we should remember the lessons we learned: that unknowns in our research processes might actually be their biggest virtue.

Notes:

¹ Barry M. Goldenberg, "Rethinking Historical Practice and Community Engagement: Researching Together with 'Youth Historians.'" *Rethinking History* 23 (1): 55.

Barry M. Goldenberg is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Urban and Minority Education (IUME) at Teachers College, Columbia University. Barry's forthcoming book, *Strength through Diversity: Harlem Prep and the Rise of Multiculturalism* (Rutgers University Press) explores the history of a community school during the civil rights era. He has also published on history education, pedagogy, and the public humanities, and proudly serves as an Adjunct Professor of History at El Camino College in Los Angeles.

Dave Tell is Professor of Communication Studies and Co-Director of the Institute for Digital Research in the Humanities at the University of Kansas. He is the author of *Remembering Emmett Till*, which was listed as a 2019 book of the year by the Economist and winner of the Mississippi Historical Society's 2020 McLemore Prize.

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