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GLOBAL

Scholactivism – A growing movement of scholar-activists

Rebecca Farnum

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An increasing number of academics and students are keen to ensure their work has a social impact, questioning the purpose of knowledge and using it to create transformative change. The role of academia in public life and social change has always been debated. Many people critique universities as ‘Ivory Towers’, with little relevance to the ‘real’ world. Yet research – much of it taking place in universities – has been critical to the creation of technology and the arts.



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Equally controversial is the role of individual academics in public life. 'Should scientists have a stake in their research? How should researchers share their knowledge? Should intellectuals engage with the public?' are questions that are constantly disputed.

The relationships between information, researchers and society are not always clear. There are, though, a few generally agreed upon connections:

- *Academic institutions and people are creators and reproducers of knowledge:* The university is, fundamentally, a system where students are taught extant knowledge and researchers seek additional knowledge. Universities, publishers, researchers, teachers, scholars, students give rise to and are shaped by information.
- *Knowledge has the potential to influence society and make change:* Information influences decisions on both micro and macro levels. A farmer may change her crop thanks to a meteorologist's prediction. The US Government prints money based on economic theories.
- *The impact of information may be positive or negative:* Advances in chemistry allowed for the atomic bombing of Japan, but also for the more effective treatment of cancer.

Because of the three connections above, the people and institutions creating and reproducing knowledge play a role in social change. A researcher, if only indirectly, affects the world through their work. The knowledge they produce shapes society.

Traditionally, the focus for an academic has been on the indirectness of their impact. Researchers are creators of knowledge – and their role ends there. It falls to policy-makers and activists to apply that knowledge.

But an increasing number of academics believe that the relationship between knowledge, its creators and social change can be taken one step further.

Scholactivism

The phrase 'scholactivism' is a mash-up of 'scholarship' and 'activism'. The driving thought behind scholactivism is that creators of knowledge can work to ensure the impact of their knowledge is positive. Scholactivists intentionally embrace the reality that their work can lead to social change. They purposefully engineer their work toward certain goals.

There is not a single approach to scholactivism or a formal movement of scholactivists. Rather, scholactivism is an umbrella term for the approach taken by an increasing number of academics who believe they have a role to play in creating social justice – and who do something about it.

Scholactivists differ from public intellectuals. Public intellectuals offer commentary on society. They work to make academic knowledge accessible and relevant to the public. Scholactivists go a step further by actively engaging in the communities they work with.

Of course, not all scholactivists would formulate their understanding of scholarship-activism in the same way. At a recent meeting of [Global Scholars Symposium](#), a network of international scholars in the United Kingdom, a breakout session on “Scholactivism: Leveraging research for social justice change” debated the scholactivist approach.

Discussion considered how to acknowledge that individual researchers are part of much larger systems, the challenges of foreseeing or controlling how information will be used by others and the difficulties in mainstreaming scholactivist work across multiple academic disciplines.

Dorm Room Diplomacy

One organisation actively engaging with these issues is [Dorm Room Diplomacy](#), or DRD. Founded by scholactivists at the University of Pennsylvania in 2009, DRD connects students around the world via online video-conferencing. The organisation’s face-to-face dialogue programme between American and Middle Eastern students reflects scholactivist principles.

The founders made use of personal passions to inform their work. The American students had family and professional connections in the Middle East. Growing up in the US post-9/11, they were particularly concerned with how they saw relations between the two regions evolving.

DRD creates positive knowledge about the ‘other’ to counter reductionist stereotypes. Alumni of Dorm Room Diplomacy video-conferences can draw on experiences and insights from a wide variety of countries and cultures in their future work – in and out of the classroom.

DRD intentionally engages academic institutions to create social change. Believing that the undergraduate years are particularly decisive in shaping worldviews, Dorm Room Diplomacy focuses on college-aged young people and leverages university systems to engage

participants.

Dorm Room Diplomacy is just one kind of scholactivist project. Others include participatory research methods, environmental engineers who spend their time out of the lab volunteering with conservationist campaigners Friends of the Earth and political campaigning.

Scholactivists do not share a single approach. Nor do we all agree on how our scholarship and activism can best be blended. But we are united in our beliefs that they should be and that we have a role to play in creating a better world.

The debate over scholactivism is really a series of debates: over what knowledge is, over the purpose of academia, over the way to change society. Scholactivists certainly don't have all the answers. But we are committed to searching for them – and working to implement them.

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