

Open Social Scholarship in Action

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Abstract

Open social scholarship highlights outreach and partnerships by emphasizing community-driven initiatives in an attempt to bridge the gap between the practices of the university and the goals of the community. Over the last few years, the Electronic Textual Cultures Lab at the University of Victoria has introduced a number of initiatives to this end, including the Open Knowledge Program and Open Scholarship Awards. In describing these initiatives, the article engages the larger framework of community engagement and public-facing scholarship. The guiding questions for this article and our work more broadly are: How can we productively put open social scholarship into practice? What type of scholarship is considered public facing? What is best practice around co-creating knowledge in the humanities with communities that are academic-aligned or non-academic?

Introduction

The increasing prevalence of open access advocacy and practice is transforming the scope of knowledge and outreach in universities. This is evident in the growing number of open access journals and scholarly resources available today. Support from major research funders, such as the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) in Canada, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) in the United States, and numerous European funders through Science Europe, is increasingly contingent on making knowledge available to the public. In parallel, recent decades have also been marked with public indignation about universities being detached from the community and its needs and failing to produce engaged citizens (Brown, 1995; Jay, 2012). In the humanities, these voices have culminated in what is now known as the “public humanities”; similar movements have coalesced in other disciplines as well. As Kathleen Fitzpatrick opines in *Generous Thinking: A Radical Approach to Saving the University* (2019), the failure to engage the public—especially in the digital age when many people have direct access to the web and are able to participate in social discourse—is a substantial lapse that risks the eventual expendability of universities.

Open knowledge has been identified as a significant focus for some universities and for communities of practice that may or may not be linked directly to the university. For example, the Open Knowledge Foundation is an international, not-for-profit initiative dedicated to making data and training available to citizen scientists and citizen scholars in order to empower them to improve society. Additionally, a number of universities, scholars, and scholarly communities have taken action by bringing together universities and members of the public through public-facing scholarship, community engagement, and collaborative research projects (Haft, 2012). Such action is expedited by technology, which has been crucial in facilitating collaboration and community engagement; in addition, many argue for the role of technology in supporting civic action, and in bringing about political and social change (Bennett 2006; Bowdon and Carpenter 2011; Caplan, Perse, and Gennaria 2007; Dumova 2012; Jenkins, and Deuze 2008; Lin and Atkin 2007; Milakovich 2011).

Open knowledge, however, is not a novel practice brought about by institutionalized knowledge production. In fact, its history can be traced back for hundreds of years, with notable examples such as the development of the public library system (Besser, 2004; Hamlyn, 1946; Harris, 1999; Jordan, 2015; Kelly, 1966, 1973) and the first and longest running scientific journal—*Philosophical Transactions* (est. 1665)—that made knowledge accessible to an inquisitive public at a time associated with grand scientific discovery (Willinsky 2006).

Numerous other noteworthy moments exemplify how open knowledge has been enacted by many scholarly communities, historically and presently (Hamlyn 1946).

Working Toward Open Social Scholarship: the Electronic Textual Cultures Lab and the Canadian Social Knowledge Institute

Within this larger context, the Electronic Textual Cultures Lab (ETCL)¹ at the University of Victoria engages in creating and openly disseminating public-facing scholarship. Over the last few years, we have established a number of initiatives devoted to the open and social creation of knowledge, some of which will be discussed at more length in this paper. One of these initiatives is the Canadian Social Knowledge Institute (C-SKI).² C-SKI originated in 2015 and is based in the ETCL; it engages issues associated with open social scholarship, which involves “creating and disseminating research and research technologies in ways that are accessible and significant to a broad audience that includes specialists and active non-specialists” (Canadian Social Knowledge Institute n.d.). Open social scholarship highlights outreach and partnerships by emphasizing community-driven initiatives in an attempt to bridge the gap between the practices of the university and the goals of the community.

As noted above, knowledge production does not occur in the university only; its creation, sharing, and dissemination should reflect the many individuals and institutions involved in such an undertaking. To immerse ourselves in the theoretical foundations of our work, we have developed annotated bibliographies that engage with the topic of social knowledge creation (Arbuckle, Belojevic, El Hajj, et al. 2017) and open social scholarship (El Khatib, Seatter, El Hajj et al. 2019), and members of the ETCL have written and presented variously on these topics. For training purposes, we also facilitate a stream of related courses at the Digital Humanities Summer Institute (DHSI).³ We recognize outstanding work in this area through the Open Scholarship Awards, discussed in further detail below. And, finally, we coordinate the Open Knowledge Program, also discussed in more detail in the following. Although many of these initiatives are grounded in our own local context in and around the University of Victoria, these activities can also be adapted for different institutional contexts, and we hope that any lessons we have learned can help others invested in putting open social scholarship into action. Related to that mission, guiding questions for our work include: How can we productively put open social scholarship into practice? What type of scholarship is considered public facing? What is best practice around co-creating knowledge in the humanities with communities that are academic-aligned or non-academic?

Open Scholarship Awards

Partnerships with community members often centre on goal-oriented projects addressing a specific societal need, including providing information that is useful to many. However, the majority of universities in North America are yet to institutionalize a reward system that appropriately recognizes scholars and students who engage in public facing work or in community engagement (Pasque et al., 2005; Ellison and Eatman 2008; Sturm et al., 2011; Alperin et al. 2018). The ETCL and C-SKI are working to remedy this omission by publicly acknowledging open scholarship that “incorporates open access, open data, open education, and other related movements that have the potential to make scholarly work more efficient, more accessible, and more usable by those within and beyond the academy.”⁴

In 2018, C-SKI founded an annual Open Scholarship Award for work carried out by scholars, librarians, citizen scholars, research professionals, or administrators, as well as an Emerging Researcher Open Scholarship Award for undergraduate students, graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, or early stage professionals. The 2020 Open Scholarship Award was awarded to William J. Turkel (Western U) and Adam Crymble (U Hertfordshire), working with the Programming Historian Editorial Board and Project Team. This group received the award for *The Programming Historian* (<https://programminghistorian.org>), a website that publishes novice-friendly, peer-reviewed tutorials that help humanists learn a wide range of digital tools, techniques, and workflows to facilitate research and teaching. Originally an open source, open content, and open access textbook, William J. Turkel and Alan MacEachern founded a site based on the original textbook for community creation and peer review of tutorials. Honourable mentions for the 2020 Open Scholarship award include Eduardo Viana da Silva (U Washington) for *Bate-Papo: An Introduction to Portuguese* and Kenton Rambsy (U Texas, Arlington) for *#TheJayZMixtape*.

The 2020 Emerging Open Scholarship Award was awarded to Nastasia Herold (U Leipzig), Wiki Club Wikipetcia Atikamekw Nehiromowin, and Wikimedia Canada. This group received the award for *The Atikamekw Knowledge, Culture and Language in Wikimedia Projects* (https://ca.wikimedia.org/wiki/Atikamekw_knowledge,_culture_and_language_in_Wikimedia_projects). The Atikamekw language is spoken by about 97% of the Atikamekw indigenous communities in Quebec, but because it is not represented in online spaces, many members of these communities resort to their second language (French) to surf the web. Working closely with the Atikamekw community, linguist Nastasia Herold has led the effort to create Atikamekw content on Wikipedia, a project supported by the Wikimedia Foundation. Honourable mentions for the 2020 Emerging Open Scholarship Award include Melanie Walsh (Cornell U) for *Tweets of*

a Native Son, Ela Przybylo (Illinois State U) for *Feral Feminisms, Intersectional Apocalypse*, and *The Labor of Open*, and Darren Reid (U Victoria) for the *Peter O'Reilly Mapping Project*.

Open Knowledge Practicum Program and Public-Facing Scholarship

One way that contemporary universities engage with the community is through collaboration with citizen scientists and citizen scholars. Citizen science projects are conducted either entirely or partially by non-expert community members, who receive training to complete the necessary tasks. These projects make use of web 2.0 technologies, including social media, to make the research process and, as a best practice, the research data and publications, open and collaborative. As a research methodology, citizen science is well established in the sciences and social sciences, most often involving data collection. For example, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Citizen Science program is a model for successful citizen science projects, having gathered bird-related observational data from hundreds of thousands of citizen scientists all over the world over the past 20 years. Another well-established project—Galaxy Zoo—invites citizen scholars to classify images of galaxies, and was the founding project of Zooniverse, a citizen-scholarship platform that hosts projects in the sciences, social sciences, and humanities. Citizen scholarship remains an emerging methodology in the Humanities, but some notable examples include the *Pleiades gazetteer* (<https://pleiades.stoa.org/>), *Transcribe Bentham* (<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bentham-project/transcribe-bentham>), and *History Harvest* (<https://historyharvest.unl.edu/>). Most humanities citizen scholar projects also involve data collection or correction: tasks involving transcription and OCR correction are common, for example. Although citizen science is often discussed in relation to crowdsourcing—a term that is sometimes used interchangeably with citizen science in the Humanities—project leaders report that this mode of research does not generally save time or money; rather, its value lies in increased engagement and strengthened relationships with the wider community, as well as the opportunity to demonstrating the value of research and scholarship (Rockwell 2012; Dunn and Hedges n.d.; Hendery and Gibson 2019; Terras 2016).

The ETCL explores how to bring together publicly-engaged scholarship and citizen scholarship—namely scholarship that either involves the public and/or produces knowledge that is relevant to a broad audience—through the Open Knowledge Program. Launched in the ETCL in January 2017, the Open Knowledge Program has completed 12 rounds at the time of writing, with future regular offerings planned. The program is an in-house effort at putting open social scholarship into practice, inviting faculty, staff, students, and members of the community to pursue their own public-facing projects in the ETCL, and offering support through consultation from experts in the field, as well as providing a collaborative space in the lab, access to library

materials, resources, and archives, and other project-specific support.⁵ Projects are published in online, public venues. All of the projects facilitated by the Open Knowledge Program are dedicated to bridging the gap between access and accessibility by making open knowledge meaningful and useful to the public, rather than superficially adding to the overflow of information on the Web. In doing so, we have also made it a priority to put into practice the theoretical foundations that we develop, to ensure that our outcomes make sense to the community within and outside of the lab. In order to reach out to a broader audience and to make the knowledge outputs that are produced in the practicum more accessible, we have experimented with different platforms to publish research outcomes. Instead of solely relying on existing scholarly communication systems like journals or book collections, participants take the means of producing public-facing scholarship into their own hands. As Wikipedia has become an increasingly important venue for open social scholarship, it has become a core component of the Open Knowledge Program. In recent sessions, contributing to Wikipedia has been a key outcome of the program, whether fellows edit existing articles or create new articles related to their topic. This type of experimentation with different media and communication forms for the expression of scholarly work emphasizes the increasing interplay between contemporary digital humanities scholarship and modes of knowledge production (Jones, 2014). Research findings of Open Knowledge Program-facilitated projects have been published as online exhibitions, maps, web prototypes with dynamic user interaction, databases, and more; across output, knowledge is disseminated openly, and in a form that the Open Knowledge Program fellow feels will most engage readers.⁶

The Open Knowledge Program includes three related initiatives: the Open Knowledge Practicum (OKP), the Open Knowledge Residency (OKR), and the Open Knowledge Practicum at DHSI (OKP@DHSI). The OKP—the focus of this section—lasts for one term or more, and welcomes researchers from the University of Victoria and the wider community into the lab to work on an open knowledge project. OKP@DHSI supports the ETCL's global community by inviting DHSI participants to join us for a condensed, three-day version of the practicum prior to the summer institute to develop part of their research with an open knowledge component. The OKR is an intensive, week-long residency for supporting University of Victoria graduate students as they conduct their thesis or doctoral research and share their findings in an open venue, such as by creating an open online resource or publishing in an open access journal.

As its name suggests, the Open Knowledge Practicum draws on the pedagogical model of the practicum, in which skills and knowledge are applied in practice. Practicums are common in education and professional fields including nursing and clinical psychology, but much less so in the humanities and social sciences. Although practicums are usually part of a larger curriculum,

the OKP borrows this model and adapts it as a standalone program where researchers plan, develop, and enact their own open research projects with support and consultation from the lab team and our colleagues in the Library and across campus as needed. In doing so, participants put their subject matter expertise and digital skills into action by creating open knowledge resources while gaining experience working in a DH lab as part of the research team. When required, the lab team also provides just-in-time collaborative learning in the use of specific software applications, digital tools, and project management and, in keeping with our collaborative outlook, often learns specific skills along with our OKP participants.

In what follows, we provide some examples of public-facing scholarship that speak to both local and global communities, and engage with issues of social justice to varying degrees. Bernie Klassen, a local community member, developed an open access eBook for an Open Knowledge Practicum in fall 2018, *Embodied Narratives: A Natural History of an Unnatural Object* (<https://etcl.uvic.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/EmbodiedNarratives-ANaturalHistoryOfAnUnnaturalObject-ByBernieKlassen.epub>), in which he traces the history of a 3D printed Columbian black-tailed deer skull in the collection of the Digital Scholarship Commons at the University of Victoria's McPherson Library. Klassen tracks the history of the skull itself, including how it entered the library's Ian McTaggart-Cohan collection,⁷ but his primary focus is on the "natural cycle" of the 3D printed object: the history of its digitization and printing, the material it is made of (PLA filament), its carbon footprint, biodegradability, and the overall measure of the environment sensitivity of the material. In the course of tracing this object's material history, Klassen analyses the long term effects that this particular type of 3D printing may have on the environment. At the time of writing, Klassen has returned for a second Open Knowledge Practicum in the spring 2020 session and is creating a series of object history videos to be published on YouTube.

For an Open Knowledge Practicum in Fall 2018–Spring 2019, Caitlin Burritt created a public-facing website about her Master's project in Holocaust Studies at the University of Victoria: a graphic novel about Holocaust memory and memorialization in modern Germany called *We Are Harmless, A Graphic Novel on Holocaust Memory*. Over the course of the practicum, Burritt focused on creating an interactive, digital space for the graphic novel in the form of an open access digital art exhibit that allows users to engage and interact with the art and research that went into the work. Burritt also developed and published a Wikipedia article related to her graphic novel: "The Wolves Are Back?" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Wolves_Are_Back%3F), which describes a travelling sculpture exhibition by German artist Rainer Opolka that has provoked public discussion of racism in Germany.

Darren Reid, a University of Victoria Master of Arts student in the History department, created an interactive online map of South Africa (https://studentweb.uvic.ca/~dreid820/leaflet/compiled_map.html) for his Open Knowledge Practicum in fall 2018 that visualizes how the protracted series of native policies of South Africa redrew traditional territorial boundaries, forcing the displacement of South African Indigenous groups over the 19th century. This complex history of land redistribution is recorded in legal documents and can usually only be deciphered by expert Africanists. In order to make this history accessible to other academics and to the wider public, Reid created an interactive map that offers a visual point of access for the viewer, who, in turn, can trace the boundary changes alongside a timeline. Essentially, Reid’s project aims to facilitate accessibility and in doing so makes meaning of previously inaccessible information about a significant historical and cultural occurrence.

As part of her Open Knowledge Practicum in spring 2019, Lauren Elle DeGaine (at the time a University of Victoria staff member) created a public-facing digital exhibition called *Women at the Front* (<https://victorianbodiesillustrated.wordpress.com/>). *Women at the Front* features Victorian frontispiece illustrations showing women that DeGaine found in the University of Victoria Libraries collection; also contributed all the digital images to Wikimedia Commons. DeGaine (as an MA student in the University of Victoria English Department) returned for a second Open Knowledge Practicum in fall 2019 and created a website in the University’s online academic community (<https://onlineacademiccommunity.uvic.ca/gzvh/>) featuring the life and work of the German typographer Gudrun Zapf von Hesse—one of the few internationally recognized early women typographers—as well as a new Wikipedia article about Zapf von Hesse based on her research (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gudrun_Zapf-von_Hesse).

“My Norse Digital Image Repository” (MyNDIR)⁸ by Trish Baer, an Adjunct Professor in the Department of Medieval Studies and an Open Knowledge Practicum fellow in spring 2017, is an open access website designed for members of the general public and scholars to learn about and examine illustrations of Old Norse gods and heroes. The repository also provides bibliographic documentation for its images and links to relevant resources, such as the institutes in which the manuscripts are held and links to the digital editions of early print books. Baer had created the website as part of her dissertation. During the practicum, she expanded the platform by creating XML files and uploading seventeen digitized images of Old Norse gods and heroes that the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies had provided in order to complete the content for MyNDIR’s Icelandic manuscript illustrations. Over the course of the practicum, Baer also researched and implemented strategies for increasing MyNDIR’s discoverability and accessibility online.

The Open Knowledge Program was designed with small-scale, one-person projects in mind, such as those described above. In recent years, the program has evolved to host medium to large grant-funded projects based at the University of Victoria that have a strong public-facing element and produce open access materials in the form of exhibitions, graphic novels, websites, and more. For example, Dr. Ann Stahl from the University of Victoria's Anthropology Department has been a part of the Open Knowledge Program since fall 2019, working with her research assistants Elisa O'Malley and Holly Marsh. Stahl is the principal investigator of the *Improving African Futures Using Lessons from the Past* project, a groundbreaking initiative that works with communities to develop digital cultural heritage resources from the Brong-Ahafo Region in Ghana. The resources are made openly available through a web portal called *Banda Through Time* (<https://exhibits.library.uvic.ca/spotlight/iaff>) and are used to sustain relationships to the land and local heritage, as well as foster community well-being through knowledge revitalization. These efforts are timely, as the cultural landscape of the community is rapidly evolving in response to electronic and digital technologies. The project is focused on the sustainable curation and archiving of resources, while at the same time making these resources useful to the community by developing public-facing interpretive materials from them, such as educational exhibitions and materials that can be integrated into school and university curricula. The Open Knowledge Practicum supports Stahl's project by helping her to identify project goals on a term-by-term basis and to structure the steps necessary to reach these goals; we also provide workstations to carry out project-related research and offer in-lab and cross-campus consultation support. Since the ETCL is located in the Digital Scholarship Commons within the University of Victoria's central campus library, we can collaborate with our library colleagues—for example Lisa Goddard, Associate University Librarian for Digital Scholarship and Strategy and member of the Banda Through Time project team—as well as take advantage of the many skills training workshops offered. Technical skills fostered in the Digital Scholarship Commons can then be put to use in the practicum.

The aforementioned projects are a small sample of the work hosted by the Open Knowledge Practicum. The purpose of this program, then, is twofold: to support citizen scholars and University of Victoria affiliates in their endeavour to produce open scholarship, and to engage with topics that are of community importance, either currently or in the past. Instead of launching an initiative that mobilizes community members in the form of crowdsourced academic projects—valuable as that type of engagement is—we decided to open the university and the lab space to work alongside community members on projects that are relevant to them. In coordinating the Open Knowledge Program the lab engages in more interdisciplinary collaboration within the University of Victoria as well, including with the library (and the Digital

Scholarship Commons in particular), as well as with other departments and faculty who facilitate their own projects through the ETCL.

Conclusion

In response to the questions posed at the outset—*How can we productively put open social scholarship into practice? What type of scholarship is considered public facing? What is best practice around co-creating knowledge in the humanities with communities that are academic-aligned or non-academic?*—we work through the C-SKI generally, and the Open Knowledge Program in particular, to carry out the ETCL’s mission; namely that the lab “engages, facilitates, and promotes cross-community digital initiatives at the University of Victoria, as well as in larger regional, national, and international contexts by cultivating the practices and values of open scholarship” (<https://etcl.uvic.ca>). In doing so, we foster a community that opens its space to communities within and beyond the university, and support projects proposed by our new team members, thereby creating a dynamic and diverse environment that welcomes many voices. At the same time, we engage the discussion on the role of technology in fostering and facilitating public-facing scholarship, and consider which platforms are best suited for different types of work.

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Notes

1 The Electronic Textual Cultures Lab (ETCL) is a research lab at the University of Victoria, Victoria, Canada, directed by Dr. Ray Siemens. It serves as an intellectual hub for about 20 local faculty, staff, students, and visiting scholars. Through a series of highly collaborative relationships, the ETCL's international community comprises over 300 researchers. The ETCL welcomes more than 800 students per year through their organization of the annual Digital Humanities Summer Institute (DHSI) and the Implementing New Knowledge Environments (INKE) Partnership, which has involved over 42 researchers and consultants, 53 graduate research assistants, 4 staff members, 19 postdoctoral fellows, and 30 partners and associates, and the Canadian Social Knowledge Institute (C-SKI).

2 The Canadian Social Knowledge Institute (C-SKI) represents, coordinates, and supports the work of the Implementing New Knowledge Environments (INKE) Partnership. C-SKI's activities include awareness raising, knowledge mobilization, training, public engagement, scholarly communication, and pertinent research and development on local, national, and international levels. See <https://inke.ca/projects/canadian-social-knowledge-institute/> (accessed 9 March 2020) for more information.

3. For the Digital Humanities Summer Institute stream of open social scholarship-related courses and other initiatives, see **El Khatib, R., Arbuckle, A. and Siemens, R.G.** (2019). “Foundations for On-Campus Open Social Scholarship Activities.” *KULA: Knowledge Creation, Dissemination, and Preservation Studies* 3 (1): 1–7. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5334/kula.1>.

4 <https://etcl.uvic.ca/2018/04/13/2018-open-scholarship-awards/> (accessed 5 March 2020)

5 For more about the Open Knowledge Practicum, see **El Khatib, R., Arbuckle, A. and Siemens, R.** (2019). “Foundations for On-Campus Open Social Scholarship Activities.” *KULA: Knowledge Creation, Dissemination, and Preservation Studies* 3 (1): 3. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5334/kula.14>.

6 For details of the Open Knowledge Program, see <https://etcl.uvic.ca/okp/> (accessed 5 March 2020)

7 Ian McTaggart-Cohan, collector of the skull, is referred to as the “father of Canadian ecology.” His digitized field journals can be found here at <https://www.uvic.ca/library/featured/collections/about/Cowan.php> (accessed 5 March 2020)

8 <http://myndir.uvic.ca/> (accessed 5 March 2020)