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Ten Things about the Public Stage

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Low public visibility is a long-standing issue for anthropology. Too many members of the public hold erroneous assumptions about the discipline or know nothing about it. At best they equate all anthropologists with archaeologists. Many anthropologists lament that they are not sought out by the media despite their expertise. Yet most recognize that anthropologists contribute remarkably little to public conversations and debates, policy, and governance—particularly

in comparison with colleagues in related disciplines such as economics and psychology.

Our team behind Anthropologists on the Public Stage believes that to be sought out, you have to be *seen*. The time is right to learn from those highly visible anthropologists successfully engaging in public conversations. With some support from the Wenner-Gren Foundation, we interviewed 30 anthropologists and adjacent experts already out in the public sphere. We distilled their stories and insights into a free, six-module video course——Anthropologists on the Public Stage. Each module has a downloadable exercise to help trainees develop and refine their own ideas. Here are 10 things we learned about the public stage.

1. The public and the media are hungry for anthropology. Books from behavioral economics and psychology almost always do well (see *Nudge*, or *Thinking Fast and Slow*), not to mention writers like Malcolm Gladwell who package academic research and concepts in engaging prose (see *Outliers*). Why? People want to know themselves better——their history, actions, and future. There is a growing space for anthropologists to capitalize on public interest in human behavior and culture. Gillian Tett, chair of the editorial board and editor-at-large, US for the *Financial Times*, shared that local media outlets are "often short of original content;" she would like to see more outlets tell anthropological stories. Chip Colwell, editor-in-chief for *SAPIENS*, found that the barrier for publishing an op-ed about vandalism at an archaeological site in his local newspaper was much lower than he thought.

2. Stories reveal anthropology's value. Stories are a kind of secret sauce that bring to life anthropological fieldwork, theory, and insight. Through stories we can reflect our study participants' points of view and behaviors and identify broad themes and patterns. Public-ready stories shift *when* to reveal that value.

American Anthropological Association Executive Director Ed Liebow explained that unlike traditional academic writing that leads up to a grand reveal, a journalistic approach to stories typically starts with “here’s what’s important, here’s why, and here’s how I know it.” Start with what matters.

3. Stepping onto the public stage can make you a more effective anthropologist. There’s a power in learning how to communicate familiar anthropological ideas in unfamiliar ways to unfamiliar audiences. Anthropology professor and futurist Genevieve Bell found that making anthropology’s compelling insights “manageable, meaningful, and actionable” to a “totally different crowd of people” made her “a better anthropologist.” For Bell, it meant learning to communicate to tech companies, policy groups, and government as well as other academic disciplines.

4. Define and understand your audience. The best storytellers only galvanize attention when their message, style, and meaning connect directly with an audience. As Helen Fisher, biological anthropologist and TED all-star, points out, “We’ve got the topics. We just need to put them in the context of something so that it’s meaningful to the people today.” To know what is relevant to an audience, we need to know who they are, the challenges they face, and what they are looking for.

5. Have a goal in mind. Consumer anthropologist Robert J. Morais encourages asking yourself, “Why do you wanna do this at all?” Anthropology professor and YouTuber Mike Wesch knew what he wanted: bike paths in his town of Manhattan, Kansas. He organized a team of 200 students who “documented the entire town in terms of its bikeability and walkability” and developed a plan with “basic solutions” such as painting a street to make a bicycle boulevard. They “pitched it as building community and good for business. And we actually brought in people from the business community to speak on behalf of it.”

Manhattan is a “bicycle-friendly community” today due to this “amazing coalition.”

6. Lean into shared experiences with your audience. The public stage can involve direct interaction with the audience! Applied archaeologists Suanna Selby Crowley and Robert Mierendorf both incorporate touch objects for hands-on teaching and learning for kids and their families as part of museum exhibitions or cultural institute educational programs. Anthropology professor Faye Harrison shared the value of theatrical performance for bringing to life “the other side of paradise” in Jamaica to live audiences.

7. Create your work to galvanize media attention. Design anthropologist Dori Tunstall created a design workshop called “It’s My Future Toronto” with “8- to 12-year-old, Black, Indigenous, and people of color youth about redesigning the city in response to COVID and systemic racism.” She then tapped into her network of journalists who cover similar topics and pitched a story about the project to gain coverage and spread the message. Business and design anthropologist and media producer Adam Gamwell cocreated *Faxina*, a podcast that tells the hidden stories of migrant Brazilian domestic workers in their own voices. He built this podcast with support from PRX and Google podcasts to ensure professional public radio quality and distribution best practices.

8. Don’t be afraid to be provocative to hook your audience’s attention. Anthropologists can use provocation to reveal the relevance of cultural issues to everyday life. Anthropologist, journalist, and community organizer Suzan Erem imagines making the point to a reporter that biological “race doesn’t exist” among humans; rather, it is a social construct. But then she cautions, “You have to follow it up with something that you think might make an interesting news story. And so, ‘Why today is the country so divided over skin color?’ Now this becomes the possible feature story because it’s relevant, highly politicized

situation and counters a general understanding of these things, but not in a way that's so foreign that nobody would be interested." Hook your audience with relevant, everyday stories and use them to bring to life social theories and systems.

9. Facilitate change. Anthropology professor Yolanda Moses explains how she organized the 150th anniversary of the City University of New York, an institution established for immigrant children. During the event, eight Nobel laureates, who were primarily white and Jewish began sharing stories of their experiences about how they could not afford their books and could not get into Harvard or Yale because of quota restrictions. Moses recalls there was "an *aha* moment between the speakers and the students when they realized they had had the same experiences" managing and overcoming discrimination, and the students came away with a better sense of what they could become.

10. Put on your policy hat. Rebecca Chamberlain-Creangă, an elected member of the City Council for Troy, Michigan, draws on her anthropology training to bring out "resident voice" in advocating for her constituents. Podcaster and PhD candidate Brendane Tynes spoke truth to power around sexual assault on campus. She noted that "… the only thing that made sense to me at the time to do with the anger was to change the policy."

Authors

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Elizabeth K. Briody has been involved in cultural-change efforts for 30+ years—first at General Motors Research and later through her consulting practice, Cultural Keys. Her books include *Transforming Culture* and *The Cultural Dimension of Global Business*. She leads the Anthropology Career Readiness Network (formerly Commission) to improve student preparation for careers.

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Adam Gamwell is a business and design anthropologist, award-winning media producer, and founder of *Anthrocurious*, a social impact storytelling and human insights consultancy. He is creator and host of This Anthro Life, a podcast that explores humanity's creative potential through design, culture, and technology. But fundamentally he's a storyteller who is driven to make the world a more sane, friendly, and humane place.

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