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What does it mean to be a “public scholar” in the age of social media?

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Abstract

For the 2023 Modern Languages Association Annual Convention, I was invited to contribute to a roundtable panel on “precarities in public scholarship and on public platforms in Japanese studies.” The panel was organized by Andrea Mendoza (University of California, San Diego) and Colleen Laird (University of British Columbia) and brought together six scholars to speak about the challenges and possibilities for public scholarship in the age of social media. The participants work in both Japan and the United States and also included: Paula Curtis (University of California, Los Angeles), Sae Kitamura (Musashi University), Akiko Shimizu (University of Tokyo), and Tomomi Yamaguchi (Montana State University). The panel made it possible for all of us to speak from our personal experiences of online harassment, to discuss the challenges and importance of public-facing engagement, and to share best practices from the space of Japanese studies.

Introduction to the issue and background

What does it mean to be a public scholar? “Public scholarship” is a term used to describe research-based work intended for a broad audience, often also with the goal of serving the public interest. Lakshman Yapa summarizes public scholarship as including at least some of these following tributes: “it addresses issues of public interest; knowledge is generated in the community as well as the university; agents producing knowledge include community residents as well as teachers and students; it integrates research, teaching, and service; the beneficiaries of new knowledge include the university as well as the community.”¹⁾

1) Lakshman Yapa, “Public Scholarship in the Postmodern University,” *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, no. 105, Spring 2006, pp. 73-93: pp. 73-74.

New media is connecting scholarship and the public in new ways. One of the first places people turn to when investigating something they don't know is Wikipedia, which has become one of the largest and most-consulted reference works in human history. Wikipedia has been written through open collaboration, often sourcing academic work, sometimes edited also by academics themselves. But the editorial process of this project is not immune to political pressures and harassment.

Social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have become important places to publicize academic work and events, and through which scholars can engage in contemporary debates. While in 2015, Erilis Çela argued while examining the Albanian case that social media may resemble the Habermasian rational public sphere (a sphere accessible to all citizens in which free discussion that develops public opinion can take place), in 2018, Lisa M. Kruse, Dawn R. Norris, and Jonathan R. Flinchum found that in the United States social media platforms can be popular but that many younger participants avoid political discourse online.²⁾ One of the main reasons for this was “fear of online harassment and workplace surveillance.”

For scholars whose work engages with political discourse, the risk of online harassment can deter them from attempting to engage as a public scholar. There is a growing body of research on online harassment targeting scholars that finds that networked technologies (ranging from Twitter to Academia.edu) are becoming essential parts of contemporary scholarly activities, and furthermore that expectations around scholars' public engagement also encourages online participation and presence.³⁾

2) Erilis Çela, *European Journal of Social Sciences, Education and Research*. Vol. 2, Issue 3 (May-August 2015), p. 126-131; Lisa M. Kruse, Dawn R. Norris, and Jonathan R. Flinchum, “Social Media as a Public Sphere? Politics on Social Media,” *The Sociological Quarterly*. Vol. 59, Issue 1 (2018), pp. 62-84.

3) Chandall Gosse, George Veletsianos, Jaigris Hodson, Shandell Houlden, Tonia A. Dousay, Patrick R. Lowenthal, and Nathan Hall, “The hidden costs of connectivity: nature and effects of scholars' online harassment,” *Learning, Media and Technology*. Vol. 26, Issue 3 (2021), pp. 264-280.

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But while the pressures to engage online may be felt by most scholars, some scholars are more vulnerable to online harassment than others. “Researchers who focus on politics, diversity, feminism, or popular conceptions of liberal politics and social justice interests, for example, have received much public attention over their experiences with online harassment based on these ideas.”⁴⁾

Against this larger background, the stated goal of the roundtable panel was to discuss these issues specifically within the Japanese studies space, and to speak about the risks and to share best practices for public scholarship in the age of social media.

My experience

I was invited to participate in this roundtable because of my experience of online harassment as a co-author of a fact-checking document regarding the history of the so-called “comfort women” system organized by the Japanese imperial military in WWII. In February 2021, along with four other historians of modern Japan, I published an article online calling for the retraction of an academic article that made claims about the “comfort women” system, basing our case on careful analysis of the evidence omitted, distorted, and misused by the author of the article.⁵⁾

Almost immediately, the five of us (who had initially connected over Twitter to co-author the article), faced intense harassment on Twitter. One freelance journalist with over 100,000 followers on Twitter threatened my co-author Sayaka Chatani a “future like that of Uemura’s.” Uemura Takashi is a former *Asahi Shimbun* journalist who has faced sustained harassment — death threats and a bomb threat to the university where he now works, as well as the public

4) Chandall Gosse, Gero Veletsianos, Jaigris Hodson, Shandell Houlden, Tonia A. Dousay, Patrick R. Lowenthal, and Nathan Hall, “The hidden costs of connectivity: nature and effects of scholars’ online harassment,” *Learning, Media and Technology*. Vol. 26, Issue 3 (2021), pp. 264-280.

5) Amy Stanley, Hannah Shepherd, Sayaka Chatani, David Ambaras, and Chelsea Szendi Schieder, “ ‘Contracting for Sex in the Pacific War’: The Case for Retraction on Grounds of Academic Misconduct,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, Vol. 19, Issue 5, No. 13 (March 2021).

disclosure of his teenage daughter's image alongside remarks that she should kill herself — for writing on the “comfort women” issue. The same freelance journalist responded to me that I was “rude,” and a “typical feminist” unable to speak Japanese when I pointed out the implied threat of invoking “a future like Uemura’s.” He urged his many followers to “clarify” issues with me, inviting an avalanche of online harassment.⁶⁾

At the MLA panel, I shared the way that harassment toward me often framed me using xenophobic language. One short video posted to youtube that targeted me (and made harassing videos about my co-authors Sayaka Chatani and Amy Stanley as well) was entitled: “日本から出て行け。反日害人原爆容認教授。(Anti-Japanese damage / foreigner prof accepting the atomic bomb. Yankee go home!)” This particular online attack encapsulated the tone of a lot of harassment I encountered: The harassment I faced often framed me as an “outsider” butting in on issues I did not (could not) understand. It mobilized xenophobic and also anti-immigrant language, but also employed language specifically about US power projected abroad: “Yankee go home!” and mention of the atomic bomb. It thus tapped into resentment about a perception of Japan's experience of “endless defeat” and an uneven relationship with the United States, and of historical grievance and victimhood. As a white American historian in Japan, I can understand that set of grievances. Yet, as an immigrant living in Japan, this kind of online harassment also made me anxious for my safety and the safety of my family.

This kind of harassing language existed alongside, perhaps counterintuitively but not incidentally, an ambivalence toward the position of the “objective” outside expert. In this case, the arguments presented in the article we were criticizing were embraced uncritically by a certain audience because of institutional prestige (the author is at an Ivy League institution in the United States); it was presented as objective and reliable because he presents as an older white male with a certain institutional position. By contrast, any scholars who did not read as white males were considered biased because of being “female,” Jewish, Ko-

6) I detail these events more here: Chelsea Szendi Schieder, “The History the Japanese Government Is Trying to Erase,” *The Nation*. May 26, 2021.

rean, etc. I should note here that my co-author Sayaka Chatani faced accusations of being a secret Korean, and that my Jewish co-authors faced antisemitic comments. Whether the categories were real or imagined, the harassment mobilized prejudiced tropes and sexist and racist language.

The contradictions that marked so much of debate and harassment as I experienced it in this case interested me because I think they further demonstrated the challenges to academic feminists and scholars of gender studies in a broader, shared global “illiberal” political culture. “Gender ideology” is demonized as a kind of technocratic imperialism (and what we might call liberal / neoliberal or “trickle-down” women’s empowerment has that aspect). Indeed, in Japan, there is a longer history in the modern period of white Western women acting in Japan as agents of “cultural imperialism,” histories traced by scholars Mire Koikari and Lisa Yoneyama.⁷ In this context, communities are defined as particularly vulnerable to “gender ideology.” And I think we do need to grapple with this fraught history of the relationship between cultural imperialism and “women’s advancement” in countering this interpretation. And also, this global illiberal political culture targets and attacks gender studies scholars, making them particularly vulnerable.

This speaks to what I have read gender studies scholars describe as they experience villanization, harassment, and even complete abolishment of their field in Eastern Europe. Hungarian scholar Andrea Peto and Polish scholar Weronika Grzebalska have written about how opposition to “gender ideology” has become a kind of “symbolic glue” for various illiberal populist movements now shockingly successful around the world. They note that “gender ideology” has become (1) successfully vilified as a generic marker of various contested issues associated with progressive politics, and that (2) the demonization of “gender” has been posed as affirming “normal” values to protect idealized communities around “family, nation, religious values, freedom of speech.” And, in particular, 3) “opposition to ‘gender politics’” has “allowed the Right to create broad alliances and unite various actors that have not, necessarily, been eager to co-

7) Mire Koikari, *Pedagogy of Democracy* (Temple University Press, 2008); Lisa Yoneyama, *Hiroshima Traces* (University of California Press, 1999).

operate in the past.” Peto and Grzebalska warn that progressives must take structural issues — economic inequalities, shrinkage of the state, precarity of work or the privatization of care — seriously or they will “be addressed by the illiberal populist Right in the form of exclusionary and fear-mongering policies in order to attract wider support.”⁸⁾

The Panel Discussion

As detailed above, I brought my personal experience into conversation with other scholars in the Japanese studies space to discuss how harassment can make scholars who grapple with sensitive topics publicly particularly vulnerable.

Tomomi Yamaguchi (Montana State University), spoke of her experience being harassed through targeted and harassing use of the Freedom Of Information Act (FOIA). FOIA is designed to facilitate government accountability to the public, and it requires the disclosure of documents controlled by the U.S. government, state, or other public authorities upon request. It is an important tool used by the press in particular but can be exercised by any person.

However, FOIA has also been used as a tool to target scholars. The Union of Concerned Scientists issued a report in 2015 noting that “open records requests are increasingly being used to harass and intimidate scientists and other academic researchers, or to disrupt and delay their work.”⁹⁾ In 2019, the Task Force on Civil and Human Rights at the Middle East Studies Association also released a memo stating, “The targeting of academics at public universities who study controversial topics with public records requests seems to be accelerating and has affected a broad array of researchers.”¹⁰⁾ Researchers at public research

8) Andrea Peto and Weronika Grzebalska, “Gender as symbolic glue: how ‘gender’ became an umbrella term for the rejection of the (neo)liberal order,” *Political Critique*, January 13, 2017.

9) Union of Concerned Scientists. “Freedom to Bully: How Laws Intended to Free Information are Used to Harass Researchers,” Feb. 22, 2015. Accessed Nov. 16, 2023. <https://www.ucsusa.org/resources/freedom-bully>

10) Task Force on Civil and Human Rights. Middle East Studies Association. “Memo on Public Records Harassment and Defense,” Nov. 20, 2019. Accessed November 16, 2023. <https://mesana.org/advocacy/task-force-on-civil-and-human-rights/2019/11/20/memo-on-public-records-harassment-and-defense>

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institutions must comply with FOIA requests, making scholars working as public intellectuals on controversial issues at these places particularly vulnerable.

In recent years, American right-wing scholars and journalists who have been recruited to fight Japan’s so-called “history wars” have also adopted the tactics of the U.S. far right to harass scholars working on Japanese political and historical topics. Faculty member at public universities in the United States who work on the “comfort women” history have been harassed with FOIA requests since 2015.¹¹⁾ In 2019, Prof. Yamaguchi was also subjected to a FOIA request and at the panel she shared how this request functioned as harassment. She described how it was incredibly time consuming, caused great psychological stress, and she worried of a chilling effect as well. She noted that it was a cruel irony that “tools to ensure transparency and accountability become means for harassment.”

Akiko Shimizu (University of Tokyo), spoke on how she witnessed attacks on queer and trans-inclusive feminists within established academic gender studies networks in Japan. In 2018, when Ochanomizu Women’s University announced that they would accept applications from transgender students, Shimizu noted, “transphobia divided the recently formed feminist twitterverse.” Furthermore, it did not stay contained within online spaces by also entered the ‘real world.’ Shimizu expressed disappointment with institutionalized feminism and gender studies in Japan in its inability to open up real inclusive discussion on this. She did note that there were other communities that advocated for transgender women to have space in feminist spaces (online and offline), and that at least held hope that outside of academic feminism there may be possibilities for allyship.

Sae Kitamura (Musashi University), spoke about the harassment she faced as a Wikipedia editor. In 2015 she began a project with a seminar called the English-Japanese Translation Wikipedia Education Seminar (英日翻訳ウィキベティアン養成セミナー). While her public-facing page was not vandalized, her

11) Jeff Kingston, “Contesting Academic Freedom in Japan,” *The Politics of Religion, Nationalism, and Identity in Asia* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2019), pp. 39-68. P. 60.

user talk page was vandalized, and she found the Wikipedia Trust and Safety departments to be useless. In a 2021 investigative piece for *Slate* by the journalist Yumiko Sato on how misinformation gets spread on non-English editions of Wikipedia, Sato also noted that “The talk pages on Japanese Wikipedia show how a group of editors often silence those with opposing views. Users who challenge them risk being accused of ‘political activism’ or violating rules and have their accounts blocked. It’s similar to *ijime* (bullying), a societal problem in Japan. The community is far from what the ‘public sphere’ is supposed to be.”¹²⁾ Kitamura’s experience illustrates this issue very clearly. Unsurprisingly, the content on Japanese Wikipedia that tends to be subjected to most of this bullying among editors and subsequent misinformation tend to be those same subjects that tend to be attacked in the so-called “history wars.”

Best Practices and a Way Forward

These shared experiences demonstrate the challenges that face any scholar who attempts to engage with the public. At the same time, holding a space for this kind of discussion at a major academic conference opened up a way to share experiences and best practices. The audience at the panel ranged in their fields and specializations, and so it was also possible to share notes about how harassment techniques tend to operate not only within Japanese studies.

In Paula Curtis’ presentation, she traced how ringleaders on Twitter mobilized harassment, using the case in which I was involved as an example.¹³⁾ She emphasized that deplatforming such ringleaders does work to decrease harassment and better ensure that social media can approach a kind of ideal-type public sphere. She also noted the importance of scholars maintaining a presence in these public spaces, since this is where a lot of public outreach and education can and does happen.

12) Yumiko Sato. “Non-English Editions of Wikipedia Have a Misinformation Problem,” *Slate*. March 19, 2021. Accessed Nov. 17, 2023. <https://slate.com/technology/2021/03/japanese-wikipedia-misinformation-non-english-editions.html>

13) Paula Curtis. “Commentary: Taking the Fight for Japan’s History Online.” *Critical Asian Studies*. Accessed Nov. 16, 2023. <https://criticalasianstudies.org/commentary/2021/10/12/commentary-paula-r-curtis-taking-the-fight-for-japans-history-online>

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We discussed the importance of sharing best practices also at an institutional level to deweaponize FOIA requests. We also discussed that online networks of public scholars can create coalitions to protect any individual scholar who may be particularly vulnerable. Personally, I did see how the longer history and many generations of transnational coalition-building around the “comfort women” history protected me when I faced targeted harassment. The longer movement had forged transnational networks, and although there is a great deal of internal debate, that debate can also exist alongside coalitions. Reflecting on this, the challenge is also to create more protective coalitions that share general goals and values but allow for differences, and that recognize our shared risk of precarity, even as that precarity can be uneven.

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