

How Can We Broaden and Diversify Humanities Knowledge Translation?

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Throughout history, knowledge that was derived from the study of philosophy, languages, literature, history, human geography, politics, and religion—topics now grouped together under the umbrella of the humanities—has been created, shared, and circulated in various ways. Different production and sharing methods have ranged from the casual and conversational to the institutionalized and regulated. In *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (1998), print historian Adrian Johns charts how an emerging printing industry and its many actors created and directed knowledge production through a “social history of print” (6). In opposition to historians like Elizabeth Eisenstein (and her notion of a singular “print culture” [1980]), Johns argues that there are multiple print cultures that emerge in response to local contexts. In his later book, *Piracy: The Intellectual Property Wars from Gutenberg to Gates* (2009), Johns finesses this argument. He undertakes a substantial historical analysis of information piracy and intellectual property from the 17th century forward and concludes that, again, there are multiple, localized forces at work in both the development, guidance, and propagation of knowledge output. In *A Social History of Knowledge: From Gutenberg to Diderot* (2000)—a sweeping history of knowledge creation from the 15th to 18th centuries—Peter Burke outlines how knowledge was constituted, organized, and shared through specific social institutions, with a focus on Eu-

ropean intellectuals in the early modern period. Burke concludes that knowledge is plural (“knowledges” [13]), and that various knowledges can develop, intersect, and co-exist.¹

Despite evidence of the plurality of knowledge (including academic knowledge), and Burke’s and Johns’ suggestions of its varied, context-specific, and even messy circulation, the creation and sharing of humanities knowledge in the 21st century appears to be much more regulated. The official channels of knowledge production have narrowed, in a sense; humanities practitioners share knowledge in much more delineated ways as the scholarly communication system has become more and more standardized.² In fact, humanities knowledge is largely considered to be shared only through its teaching in a postsecondary classroom or through its academic publication: published in print or online academic journals, collected as chapters in edited books and anthologies, or shared as monographs (Borgman 2007, Fitzpatrick 2011).³ The ordered lineage of the scholarly communication system is often traced to the introduction of the academic journal in the 17th century (see, for example, Guédon 2001), but this sanitized version of publishing history has been questioned. For instance, digital humanist and literary studies scholar Ray Siemens suggests that it is important to look back even further than the 17th century and the inception of the *Journal des sçavans* in France and the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* in England (2002). Rather, Siemens argues, earlier and less formalized ways of creating and sharing knowledge—including verbal exchanges, epistolary correspondence, and manuscript circulation—are equally important forbearers for a 21st century scholarly communication system (2002); acknowledging such unofficial precedents could diversify how we share academic work, moving forward.

There is a certain irony in the fact that at a time when mass, global communication is increasing evermore rapidly the spread of humanities research as such continues to be restricted by its very mechanism of circulation. Although the rate of academic journal publishing is staggering—researchers publish 2.5 million articles in journals annually (Ware and Wabe 2015)—most people who are not employed by, studying at, or otherwise affiliated with a postsecondary institution do not look to this massive corpus for their information seeking purposes. As Tom Sheldon of the London-based Science Media Centre quips, “Many people still learn about science the same way they learn about Vladimir Putin, Syria or the World Cup: through news sites, television and radio” (2018, n.p.). Others, like philosophy scholars Nicola Mößner and Philip Kitcher, suggest that knowledge is increasingly sought on the more public spaces of the internet primarily, as the “inclusive technology of the web not only increases the amount of information available, but also allows claims to knowledge to emanate from a more heterogeneous collection of sources than those represented by traditional mass media” (2017, 1). Such informa-

tion seeking may occur on social media sites, the online encyclopedia Wikipedia, news sites, or via the ubiquitous Google search leading to any of the above sources and many others as well.

With such a range of venues and sources at one's fingertips, it is easy to see how the average knowledge consumer might be content with what is readily available versus what might require specialist knowledge and skills to find and understand. Unfortunately, what is readily available—the top hit of that Google search—is not necessarily the most accurate accounting of a topic or event. This readily available content is algorithmically relevant to the search, but not a guarantee of verified information. Even more unfortunate still is the prevention of access (on many levels) to the research that would provide a more complete, or more verifiable, picture. In terms of academic publishing, even if a peer-reviewed scholarly article is that first hit on Google, that does not necessarily mean that the searcher will be able to access and read the work due to the for-pay model currently upheld by many academic publishers.

Within the context of a historical plurality of academic knowledge sharing (as espoused by Johns, Burke, and Siemens), in what follows I suggest that those working in the humanities could diversify their knowledge creation and sharing practices. I focus primarily on how knowledge translation is defined and undertaken in the health and social sciences, and how identifying and naming such practices in the humanities could be a useful undertaking. Overall, my goal in drawing together these explorations is to make a case for broadening and adding value to humanities knowledge sharing in Canada, within the framework of open social scholarship.

Knowledge Translation Lessons from the Health and Social Sciences

In Canada, knowledge translation is a term most often employed in the health sciences. A search for “knowledge translation” in the University of Victoria Libraries online catalogue brings up nearly 18,000 journal articles; when the search is limited to fields relevant to the health sciences, ~14,000 or 78% of hits remain. Knowledge translation is commonly understood as:

an encompassing term that denotes the exchange, synthesis and ethically-sound application of research findings within a complex system of relationships among researchers and knowledge users; the incorporation of research knowledge into policies and practice, thus translating knowledge into improved health of the population. (Kiefer, Frank, Di Ruggiero, Dobbins, Manuel, Gully, and Mowat 2005, n.p).⁴

Knowledge translation is prominent in the health sciences due to the immediate public relevance of the field (“the improved health of the population”) and the necessity to communicate findings with many different actors without fear of obfuscation or misunderstanding. Although knowledge translation as a general principle is widely accepted to be beneficial and important, there are variations on the term. In their survey of a collection of health funding agencies from around the world, Jacqueline M. Tetroe and her co-authors⁵ deduce that different agencies promote different definitions of knowledge translation, as well as vary in their approaches to incentivizing it (2008). Despite the broad and generic relevance of the definition provided above, Tetroe et al. point out that “A recent Google search (‘definition knowledge translation’), restricted to Canadian web pages, yielded 1,350,000 hits” (126, 2008). As the authors acknowledge, many of the websites flagged by Google share a common understanding of knowledge translation and cite the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) definition.⁶

Some academics question the validity and efficacy of knowledge translation, especially given the already significant demands on researcher time and energy. They argue that there is a lack of direction regarding which knowledge translation strategy is most effective in which situation, and that there are very few reports on the success of a knowledge translation activity (Mitton, Adair, McKenzie, Patten, and Perry 2007; LaRocca, Yost, Dobbins, Ciliska, and Butt 2012). Acknowledging the need for this kind of direction and reporting, social scientists Elizabeth M. Banister, Bonnie J. Leadbeater, and E. Anne Marshall edited the collection *Knowledge Translation in Context: Indigenous, Policy, and Community Settings* (2011). This collection shifts the conversation away from defining or describing knowledge translation; rather, chapter authors focus on examples of knowledge translation in action or else critique the ways in which knowledge translation can fail to live up to its promise. Tetroe et al. reinforce that there is confusion around knowledge translation when they write “It is [...] not surprising to watch the eyes of health researchers dart around in confusion when [knowledge translation] is marshaled as a reason for them to do even more with their limited time and research grant funds” (2008, 152). Within a related framework of knowledge to action (or KTA, as it is known), Ian D. Graham, Jo Logan, Margaret B. Harrison, Sharon E. Straus, Jacqueline Tetroe, Wenda Caswell, and Nicole Robinson also underline the lack of clarity regarding knowledge translation vocabulary and application:

a recent study we conducted with 33 applied research funding agencies in 9 countries identified 29 terms used to refer to some aspect of the concept of knowledge to action. Some of the more common terms applied to the KTA process are knowledge transla-

tion, knowledge transfer, knowledge exchange, research utilization, implementation, dissemination, and diffusion. The situation is further complicated by the use of the terms, often interchangeably. (2006, 14)

Mitton et al. also suggest that, at least in Canada, there has been an increase of research articles that claim to have a knowledge transfer element or application due to the influence of the Canadian Health Services Research Foundation (now the Canadian Foundation for Healthcare Improvement) and their prioritization of knowledge translation (2007, 734). The authors also consider how knowledge transfer and exchange between researchers and non-researchers could be facilitated by someone who is “trained specifically in information exchange and has set aside time for the process” (740): a knowledge broker.

According to sociologist Morgan Meyer, a knowledge broker is someone who facilitates the creation, sharing, and use of knowledge (2010). Cecilia Benoit, Lauren Casey, Mikael Jansson, Rachel Phillips, and David Burns draw on the work of Jonathan Lomas (2007) to offer a more detailed definition:

Knowledge brokers are often paid research staff whose focus is linking community agencies with researchers and facilitating their interaction so that they are able to better understand each other's goals and professional cultures, influence each other's work, forge new partnerships, and promote the use of research-based evidence in decision making. (2011, 27)

Communication scholars Nicole Gesualdo, Matthew Weber, and Itzhak Yanovitzky consider journalists to be knowledge brokers, but other actors in the scholarly communication system could assume such a role as well. The figure of the knowledge broker emerges variously in the chapters of Bannister, Leadbeater, and Marshall's 2011 collection.⁷ For example, Benoit et al. reflect on an academic knowledge translation study undertaken with members of the low income and homeless population in Victoria, B.C., Canada (2011). They emphasize the importance of the knowledge broker as a “bridge individual” (28), a liminal person who can navigate both the academic and non-academic worlds deftly in order to ensure knowledge translation occurs; Benoit et al. deem this a “core [knowledge translation] strategy” (17). In part, Benoit et al. consider this role so important because “practitioners have gaps in their knowledge base, but these seldom translate into research questions that are investigated by health and social scientists” (15). Instead of only translating knowledge from academics to non-academics, a knowledge broker can serve as the mediator in a conversation between two groups who both have valuable knowledge

to share. The role of the knowledge broker—entrenched as it is within the weedy rhetoric of knowledge translation—could be a pivotal one for the humanities in particular.

Although there is much literature, consideration, and promotion of knowledge translation in the health and social sciences, this same principle is not as prevalent in the humanities. In the humanities, the nearest term to knowledge translation is “knowledge mobilization,” defined by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) as “an umbrella term encompassing a wide range of activities relating to the production and use of research results, including knowledge synthesis, dissemination, transfer, exchange, and co-creation or co-production by researchers and knowledge users” (n.d.).⁸ Agency and execution represent further differences between knowledge mobilization in the humanities and knowledge translation in the health and social sciences, where there are often designated individuals to undertake such activities. Moreover, without official knowledge translation mechanisms, those in the humanities can become increasingly secluded from the interests of broader publics due to a discursive isolation from these groups.⁹ As Banister, Leadbeater, and Marshall write, “there has been increasing awareness of the importance of the users of research knowledge as key contributors to the process of [knowledge translation]” (2011, 205). The creation of a subset of the humanities labour force specifically focused on translating and sharing humanities research, as well as integrating non-humanities inquiry and findings into academic discussion, would ensure that those who would benefit most from humanities work—fellow researchers, students, policymakers, secondary school teachers, citizen scholars, and other engaged publics—could access and understand publicly-funded research.

Conclusion: The Potential of the Knowledge Broker for Humanities Work

Open access to, translation of, and engagement with humanities research is perhaps more critical now than ever before. Since the 2016 American federal election, the growth of “fake news”—untrue information intended to manipulate and even foment a subset of the general population—has become a pressing international issue and is considered to be a threat to the democratic state.¹⁰ Access to vetted and verified research is one component of the fight against the spread of misinformation, which, in terms of fake news, is available for free and in highly public and well-populated social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Heightened access to complex but comprehensible ideas regarding cultural affinity, the history of a nation, and how ideas have been expressed in certain eras and then evolved over time could nuance national con-

versations in productive ways. A humanities knowledge translation mechanism—be that increased collaboration, opening up access to research in conscientious ways, designating knowledge brokers, or another strategy—could enact the critical spread of humanities research. In doing so, the humanities could contribute to the information needs and engagement of broader publics more effectively—especially at a time when there is a massive amount of information available as well as a large audience for said information.

The sheer amount of knowledge translation literature—only a small portion of which is summarized and referenced here—underscores the need to develop creative strategies to bridge academic and non-academic communities. Moreover, it represents the importance of ensuring that the extensive amount of academic research underway is shared in ways that are broadly accessible, meaning that they are available, comprehensible, and useful to those who are not necessarily trained specialists in a specific academic subfield. By the same token, it is understandable that, as Tetroe et al. point out, academic researchers themselves have resisted requests to add another layer of activity to their research, as they are largely oversubscribed and/or under-resourced already. Due to significant demands on their time, academics who hold precarious positions comprised of short, potentially non-renewable contracts for heavy teaching loads may be especially unable to embark on knowledge translation for any research they are able to find the time and resources to undertake.

The role of the knowledge broker—be that a student, librarian, faculty member, or communications or research office staff member embedded in the academic system already, or else an adjacent figure like the museum curator or science journalist—can ensure that critical knowledge translation practices are taking place without additional demands on researcher time. In order for these knowledge brokers to do translation work effectively, they must have open access to the corpus of academic research. There is national-scale value in the access to and translation of research; as policy researcher Simon Lenton writes, “There is little point in undertaking policy research if no one who can draft or implement policy is aware of it. All politicians and their advisers read newspapers; few read academic journal articles and reports” (2011, 116). Without translation mechanisms, those who are making decisions about the future direction of a community or even an entire country may do so without an understanding of the relevant research for any specific issue.

The INKE Partnership has defined open social scholarship as the act of “creating and disseminating research technologies to a broad, interdisciplinary audience of specialists and non-specialists in ways that are both accessible and significant” (Powell, Mauro, and Arbuckle 2017, 3). Knowledge brokering is one of the ways to enact such an open ideal regarding the possibili-

ties for scholarship. Through her exploration of the quality and value of community/academic initiatives in the *Knowledge Translation in Context* book collection, New Zealand-based evaluation consultant Kate McKegg writes:

In order for collaboration, meaningful dialogue, critical questioning, and courageous action to take place, there needs to be a climate where people trust each other, where the people and the processes have integrity and relevance to those involved, and where this is a balanced exchange of resources, time, and effort that recognizes and values diverse contributions. (2011, 62)

Such an engaged approach to collaborative scholarship aligns well with the INKE Partnership conception of open social scholarship. But “collaboration, meaningful dialogue, critical questioning, and courageous action” will not necessarily be fueled by simply making academic work openly available online. In order to undertake the action-oriented mandate at the heart of open social scholarship, and to realize its full potential for varied publics, academic work must be both informed by a myriad of voices and translated for the benefit of many, rather than intended only for the narrowed focus of the few. In this way, humanities work can once again resemble the varied and multiple knowledge production that Johns, Burke, and Siemens (among others) all point to.

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Notes:

- . Burke continues this line of argumentation in his follow-up book, *A Social History of Knowledge II: From the Encyclopédie to Wikipedia* (2012), where he expands his scope from the early modern period into the twentieth century. ↩
- . This process has taken place in step with the increasing commercialization of the scholarly communication system since the mid-20th century; see Jean-Claude Guéron (2001). ↩
- . Looking beyond the more narrow scope of publishing, humanities research is often shared through teaching, giving lectures and talks, and providing interviews or editorials when requested. ↩
- . This definition comes from the article “Fostering Evidence-based Decision-making in Canada: Examining the Need for a Canadian Population and Public Health Evidence Centre and Research Network”; note that the authors of the article prefer the term “knowledge exchange” to knowledge translation. They write, “To suggest the ideally bi-directional flow of information and ideas between research producers and users, this paper will use the term ‘knowledge exchange and uptake’ (KEU) rather than the more common ‘knowledge transfer and uptake’ and ‘knowledge translation’” (Kiefer et al. 2005, n.p.). Kiefer et al. define knowledge exchange as “the interactive and iterative process of imparting meaningful knowledge between research users and producers, such that research users receive information that they perceive as relevant to them and in easily usable formats, and producers receive information about the research needs of the users” (n.p.). This nuancing has gained traction in the knowledge translation literature, as evident in its uptake by Anne E. Marshall and Francis Guennette in their book chapter “Cross-Cultural Journeys: Transferring and Exchanging Knowledge Among Researchers and Community Partners” (2011). They write, “In our team’s [...] context, we prefer the term knowledge transfer and exchange (KTE), as described by Kiefer et al. (2005): the interactive exchange of knowledge between research users and research producers. We believe that the phrase transfer and exchange illustrates the diverse and developing nature of communication about research. Sometimes there is a direct transfer of knowledge, such as giving information or explaining a procedure; at other times, there is a two-way exchange of knowledge, such as a joint discussion of data implications” (37). ↩
- . Ian D. Graham, Robbie Foy, Nicole Robinson, Martin P. Eccles, Michel Wensing, Pierre Durieux, France Lé Garé, Camilla Palmhøj Nielson, Armita Adily, Jeanette E. Ward, Cassandra Porter,

Beverley Shea, and Jeremy M. Grimshaw. ↩

- . According to CIHR, “Knowledge Translation is defined as a dynamic and iterative process that includes synthesis, dissemination, exchange and ethically-sound application of knowledge to improve the health of Canadians, provide more effective health services and products and strengthen the health care system” (n.d.). ↩
- . See Benoit et al. (2011), McCabe (2011), and Wharf Higgins, Naylor, Macleod Williams, and Sporer (2011). ↩
- . For a historical review of SSHRC policy and the uptake of concepts like knowledge mobilization since the 1970s, see Johanne Provençal’s dissertation, *Knowledge Mobilization of Social Sciences and Humanities Research: Moving Beyond a “Zero-Sum Language Game”* (2009). ↩
- . See Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *Generous Thinking: A Radical Approach to Saving the University* (2019). ↩
- . According to Wikipedia, fake news is “is a form of news consisting of deliberate disinformation or hoaxes spread via traditional news media (print and broadcast) or online social media”. ↩

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Abstract:

Humanities research is extremely relevant for the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. But despite the growing corpus of humanities research, there are few explicit translation mechanisms from academic work to

broader communities. Building off of such a premise, this paper looks at where knowledge translation is occurring in other fields and what lessons might be learned for the wider and more efficient circulation of humanities work.

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