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How to Do a Public Dissertation

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Abstract

Public dissertations allow doctoral students to engage a broader audience that is often already having conversations about our research topics, whether explicitly or not. The traditional dissertation is usually read by the committee (if you are lucky) and the author. Public projects allow early-career scholars to expand their marketability, relate their abstract topics to concrete discussions, and adapt to the changing demands of the academic space. This article includes a brief case study of the author's public dissertation to suggest possible avenues for current graduate students and faculty mentors, along with a frank discussion about the pros and cons of such a project. Six tips provide a frank discussion of the pros and cons of such a project and possibilities for graduate students interested in a public project to consider.

Keywords: dissertation; graduate school; higher education; podcast; professional development; public humanities

Like many of us in graduate school, I frequently encountered blank stares as I excitedly explained my dissertation research to my family members and friends. Unsurprisingly, they showed little interest in neo-Victorian crime narratives and their gendered implications, even after I talked at (and I do mean at) them for two hours. Weird, right?

It was not that they were not intelligent enough to understand academic arguments; I did not understand how to articulate why it mattered to them. It took me a bit to realize that what I was studying, researching, and writing about mattered outside the academy. A public project allowed me to connect with those groups. I could start talking *with* people instead of *at* them. My public dissertation was a podcast titled *Ripperature: Building the Myth*, geared toward specialists and those interested in Jack the Ripper.

1. Why a public dissertation?

A highly reported internet statistic tells us that PhD dissertations are read by an average of 1.6 people, including the author ("The Past, Present and Future of the PhD Thesis"). You may be a doctoral student and are currently reading this. In that case, you are probably experiencing an existential crisis at this number, or you are excited because that low number removes some of the scariness of a dissertation. To be fair, this number probably

is not entirely accurate. But, in my experience, it is a part of contemporary graduate school lore that your dissertation manuscript does not have that large of an audience. It is also a widely circulated piece of knowledge that dissertations are rarely the best versions of one's scholarship. *A good dissertation is a done dissertation.*

So, if only a few people read dissertations, why write one? A dissertation proves that you have made it through the weeding process of a doctorate. A dissertation is how you prove how smart and well-read you are. A dissertation is just what you do.

I am not writing to argue that we should stop doing research or dissertations at the end of our doctoral programs. I am trying to offer my experience in writing and creating a public dissertation. Personal experience, the popularity of my research topic outside the academy, and current research like *The SAGE Handbook of Digital Dissertations and Theses* (2012), *Multimodal Composing: Strategies for Twenty-First-Century Writing Consultations* (2019), *Debates in the Digital Humanities* (2012), *Shaping the Digital Dissertation: Knowledge Production in the Arts and Humanities* and *Envisioning Public Scholarship for Our Time: Models for Higher Education Researchers* encouraged me to explore a public dissertation in the form of a podcast.[1] I look to scholars like Kathleen Fitzpatrick, who writes, "Engaging with a larger public and developing a trusted network of readers interested in the work you are doing is of crucial importance.... By finding more ways to work together, and to show the processes of our work, we can begin to make a bit more visible – a bit more accessible – what it is that scholars *do.* And that, in turn, might give us the potential to invite a range of broader publics into that work, creating a richer sense of why scholarly work *matters*".[2] I want my work to be read, or in my case, listened to, by people already having conversations about the topic without perhaps explicitly talking about the implications of that topic. What we do inside the academy matters to those outside the academy. Additionally, I believe a goal of the academy should be to become equitable, anti-ableist, and feminist. A dissertation that is accessible to those outside of the university's ivory tower is a start.

2. A public dissertation in action: *Ripperature: Building the myth*

I recently graduated with my PhD (May 2024) and, like most people after the crash of 2008, experienced the job market as primarily contingent opportunities. I was fortunate to receive a job offer for a relatively stable job teaching at a university; however, that job is not tenure-track or research-focused. Throughout graduate school, I was encouraged to explore job opportunities outside the academy and assured that I was successful enough to receive a "desirable" job offer (read: research-based) in academia. I will admit that I initially chose a public dissertation to "hedge my bets," as it were. I did not know if I even wanted to try for an academic job, and I knew that with the current statistics, I probably would not even get one. A public project was a way to make me different from other candidates to potential academic employers. I can teach students about multimedia projects or digital humanities. On the other hand, I could also apply to jobs involving digital communication or podcasts outside of the university system.

More broadly, my project was a good fit for a public genre. People are having a public conversation about my research topic, Jack the Ripper, whether they are at a university or not. This conversation about one of the most well-known Victorians influences how we engage with subjects like violence against women. Many people have heard the name "Jack the Ripper" – even if they have not done extensive research on the crimes, the victims, or the

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[1] Andrews 2012; Gold 2012; Sabatino and Fallon 2019.
[2] Fitzpatrick 2021, 23.

suspects. Much of this knowledge results from the fictionalization of these crimes, known as Ripperature. Ripperature is a prevalent genre. For example, when the search phrase "Jack the Ripper" is entered into the popular website Goodreads, the site shows 1321 results. This number excludes films, television shows, video games, websites, walking tours, and so forth. The "Jack the Ripper in fiction" Wikipedia page has categories for "literature," "theater, opera and music," "film," "television," "art," "comics," "music," "video games," and "sports." For another example of the popularity of the murders, you can vote in an online poll for who you think is Jack the Ripper.[3] People outside the academy are obviously reading, watching, and participating in Ripperature. People were interested when I mentioned the topic. But, when I got into the nuts and bolts of the academic arguments I was making, they found a polite way (or impolite if you are my family) of leaving the room.

Ripperature: Crossing Gender and Genre has 10 forty(ish)-minute episodes in the first season. In the podcast, I explored multiple modes of adaptations of Jack the Ripper, like film, dime novels, and fiction, and the ways the story of the crimes has evolved in popular culture. The Ripperature genre often attempts to cross gender and genre boundaries while, more often than not, reinforcing traditional and often harmful ideologies. Broken into two significant sections concerning "Jill the Ripper" and detective figures and studying texts across forms, I found that in Ripperature, women's bodies are continuously policed by patriarchal forces while simultaneously fetishized as corpses. Each episode explored either a Victorian or neo-Victorian text like *The Whitechapel Murders; or, on the Track of a Fiend* (1888), *Stalking Jack the Ripper* (2016), or *Doctor Jekyll and Sister Hyde* (1971).

When I had the idea of doing a podcast, I had grandiose visions of a homemade recording studio containing gleaming equipment and good vibes. After I realized that probably was not possible, I settled for a closet in my home without a light that previously housed our holiday decorations. Mysteriously, the doorknob locked on its own, which resulted in several recordings of me yelling for my partner to break me out. There were still good vibes, just sans anything remotely fancy.

As of October 2024, five months after I graduated, 683 people have listened to the podcast. Each episode has at least 30 listeners, with the first having almost 200. That number is definitely higher than those who have accessed the manuscript behind my university's paywall.

I chose to do my public dissertation as a podcast, but plenty of other public forms would fit with a dissertation project. For example, you could focus on digital communication, like developing an archival tool, using mapping and various visualization software to communicate your data, or producing digital writing. There are also spaces for exploration within the creation of video and mobile games or video production. For more specific examples of public dissertations, check out *Shaping the Digital Dissertation: Knowledge Production in the Arts and Humanities.* In the next section, I have taken my experience and given six tips to provide you with some pros and cons of creating a public dissertation project using my podcast dissertation.

3. Top tips

3.1 Use your director

Obviously, you have to rely on your director with a traditional dissertation. Remember, though, that digital dissertations are still not in the mainstream. As such, getting direction

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[3] Jones n.d.

from your director is vital. I was really lucky to have so much support and encouragement from mine because she saw the value of public dissertations. She pushed me to think creatively and critically about what I wanted to say, how I wanted to say it, and why I wanted to say it that way. Make sure to have an open and honest conversation with your director.

3.2 Know your audience(s)

A public dissertation has a public audience. That sounds self-explanatory, but honestly, it is a hard adjustment when you have spent the last however many years in graduate school being explicitly told that you are not writing for your neighbor or your family. It is no secret that academic language often includes more words than necessary. If your reader has to look up a word in shame because they do not know what it means, even better. I am setting up a straw-man version of academic discourse, but the reality is that a public dissertation requires a different kind of writing. Talk to your director about who they want you to write for because this will affect how you write.

My director and I agreed that I needed to include theory to prove I deserved a doctorate. The university where I received my PhD writes this about the dissertation: "Your document should demonstrate your capacity for research and original thought."[4] Great, I thought, I could do this with a public dissertation. Scripting the episode for my particular audience required balancing sufficient analysis with a tone for a public audience. For example, I incorporated secondary and academic sources and quotes in the script while explaining them more casually than in traditional academic discourse. Additionally, I intentionally chose easily understandable quotes, as listeners could lose interest in an audio format without visuals. Practically, for the scholarship I did use, there needed to be an audio signal to indicate that I was not using scholarly quotes as my own words. In a traditional dissertation, the visual quotation marks would signal to the reader that the following ideas or words were not the words of the dissertation author. On the other hand, podcast hosts signal a quote by saying "quote" or having a voice actor read the quote. A scholarly dissertation podcast requires some amalgamation of the two strategies. In a scholarly podcast, no matter how interesting I attempt to make it, the audience will experience some listening fatigue. As a result, they could stop paying attention without an additional auditory signal. These are just a few examples of how to write or produce for your audience. Think about your medium and how best to reach the people you want to reach.

3.3 Choose a medium you already have some experience in

I chose a podcast dissertation because I loved the podcast format and had already been working with another podcast at my university. My love and experience of casual podcasts were helpful, but I needed more to transition smoothly into making an academic dissertation podcast. My original intention was to have the podcast resemble a traditional dissertation organization as closely as possible. That pleased some academics who were skeptical, but it ultimately hindered the project. My public project was not a conventional dissertation; squeezing it into an already rigid genre written for a different audience was nearly impossible.

I originally intended to create 25 episodes (several introduction episodes, three body "chapters" with four episodes each, and several conclusion episodes). During my prospectus

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[4] University of Arkansas 2023.

defense, my committee voiced concerns about the feasibility of 25 episodes. Although I was initially resistant to reducing the number of episodes, it quickly became apparent that with the time PhD students have and the problems that inevitably arise from being the first one to do something, an almost 30-episode arc was impossible. While I regret not being able to produce all the episodes I mapped out, the time and labor that writing, recording, and editing just one episode requires is a different kind of work in addition to the standard writing process. In the end, the project had 10 episodes (an introduction, two chapters with four episodes each, and a conclusion episode). As the first to do this in my program, I focused on the quality of the episodes over the number of episodes. The more people who produce alternative or digital dissertations, the more it will streamline the process and potentially make it possible to create more content. Be prepared for the labor of public dissertations.

So, if you are thinking about a public dissertation, what do you already know how to do? What software do you know how to work with?

3.4 Be prepared to learn a lot on the spot

For many of us, doing graduate school means learning on the spot. When have you ever had to write a 30–50 page document in 72 hours other than your comprehensive exams? When have you ever had to figure out how to present at a conference while knowing that the rest of your panel are tenured professors and the audience judges you because you are getting your degree from a state university? Again, I am exaggerating here, but only a little.

If you are creating a public dissertation, you will be confronted with doing a different kind of labor besides regular academic life. Writing, revising, recording, and editing just one episode was incredibly intensive. One script would be around 25 pages, which needed to be revised according to my director's requests. After the script was approved, I spent several hours recording the episode's body part (my scripted reading). Once I had recorded my part, the voice actors recorded and sent their files to me. When I first began editing audio, an episode would take at least two weeks. Editing one 10-minute section of the podcast would often take two hours. As I gained more knowledge, this process became much easier and faster. I learned how to edit by watching free videos on YouTube. After several rounds of editing random noises and any human error, I edited the disparate tracks. Then, I sent that for approval and made any necessary revisions after receiving feedback. Once the audio and script were complete, I wrote an episode description and prepared it for publishing on my chosen audio streaming service. The final step was uploading the associated episode materials (pictures, etc.) to my website.

Because of certain limitations on equipment availability on my university campus, I purchased my microphone with the money I received from a fellowship outside my department. Funding for alternative or digital dissertations is essential to deciding to do one. As universities house more audio-visual and other kinds of equipment, graduate students can use free resources.

3.5 Be prepared to defend your genre AND your content

The average dissertation is an initiation process into academia, meaning people will question you about your dissertation content, which makes sense. But with a public dissertation, you will also have to defend your dissertation's medium or genre.

As a PhD candidate, I did this project with much trepidation. As people know and have experienced themselves, graduate students have very little power within a university and

academia. I was met with both excitement and resistance. To be honest, getting that kind of resistance from faculty, in addition to the traditional critiques one gets at any point in their academic career, was frustrating and scary. For the record, you should absolutely do a public dissertation, but the reality is that you will have to defend your medium. More specifically, an "alternative" project could be critiqued for not being "scholarly" enough or isolating an academic audience.

The answer to the first question is one you will have to negotiate with your advisor. You will have to decide how much theory to bring in, who your audience is, and so forth, The second question was answered by my podcast medium. Many academics are already listening to and creating podcasts. One of the ways we can engage with public scholarship is through academic podcasting. For example, almost half of people in the U.S. have listened to a podcast within the last year, and 88% reported learning is one of their primary motivations for listening.[5] Academics isolate themselves by producing work that can only be read behind paywalls and with specialized knowledge.

3.6 Publish in more traditional ways

I wish this were not the case, but public dissertations, at least in a field like English, are rarer than not. Having publications from academic journals on my CV persuaded those who valued the public work I did less. This necessity of answering critiques I disagreed with was a result of the state of the world in 2024. As always, talk to your director about what they think, but in my experience, having parts of your dissertation published in academic journals was essential.

4. How to do a public dissertation

Public projects are the way of the future in academia. However, the reality is that choosing this path as a graduate student or early career scholar means acknowledging the risks. So, how do you do a public dissertation? Be confident. You are doing something innovative and exciting. Be ready. It will be a learning experience.

Our work in the academy often comments on practices or lived experiences outside of academia. As such, public scholarship allows for the visibility necessary to both engage with our communities and remain relevant as a discipline.

I will leave you with this story. After I released the first official episode, I received a phone call from my mother. As background, I have been privileged enough that though my mother does not always understand what I am trying to say (not because she is incapable, but because I frequently tried to communicate with the jargon of my field), she is very good at nodding along enthusiastically. She called me after that first episode, though, with a list of questions and notes about that episode. She asked for clarification, gave me her opinion on how she interpreted the passages from the text I brought up, and wanted to know more about how I made my conclusions. There were several moments in that talk when I thought, "Huh, I should have thought about that." I got off that phone call feeling like that was the first time we had an active conversation about my research. I have since had more conversations like that, but I will never forget that one. In my experience, the best part of the public dissertation was the active and thoughtful conversations I had with people who would have never read a dissertation manuscript but would listen to a podcast while doing the dishes.

You have got this.

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[5] Shearer 2023.

Gracie Bain (she/her) is an Assistant Teaching Professor in the First-Year Composition Program at the University of Oklahoma. She received her PhD in Literature in 2024. Her dissertation podcast, *Ripperature: Building the Myth*, can be found on Spotify or Apple Podcasts. Her research on nineteenth-century literature, gender, and adaptation can be found in *Literature/Film Quarterly* and the South Atlantic Review. You can also find her work as a host and editor on the Adaptation Today podcast and on Bluesky as @drgbain.bsky.social.

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