



REVIEW

Applying academic authority in public debates

Reviewed Book

Cohen, P. N. (2025).

Citizen Scholar — public engagement for social scientists.

Columbia University Press.

Reviewed by

Brian Trench

Abstract

Philip Cohen argues for social scientists to be active citizens, intervening in public debates with the legitimacy that their expertise gives them. His advocacy and advice for “citizen scholarship” are guided by his own experience.

Keywords

Citizen science; Scholarly communication; Bridging research, practice and teaching

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Philip Cohen is a US sociologist with a strong record of public activity based on his professional expertise. Through magazine articles, a blog, social media and open science initiatives, among other means, he takes part in public debates, often on topics relating to his special interest in demography. During the Covid19 pandemic and Donald Trump's first period as US president he was especially active in tackling common misconceptions and misrepresentations about population-level trends and events.

In this book Cohen brings together — partly from previously published essays and chapters — the lessons he has learned from this activity and he presents these as a guide to his professional peers. He does this in a framework of “active citizenship” which he marries with his commitment to good scholarship, insisting that each benefits from the other. Addressing fellow-social scientists, and frequently referring to them as “you” and “us”, he makes a passionate case for applying the authority attached to academic leadership to intervening in the public sphere.

In considering how Cohen's arguments relate to science communication as most readers of this journal are likely to conceive it, it is important to note that Cohen is content to be regarded as a scientist. In science communication, broadly, that term tends to apply to those working in the natural and physical sciences. In our field we have paid little attention to issues in the public communication of social sciences and humanities. One reason for this is the hesitation among those in those fields to align themselves with scientists.

From his position as a self-identifying social *scientist* Cohen finds support in the work of Max Weber on science as a vocation or profession, of Thomas Kuhn on the philosophy of science and of Robert Merton on the sociology of science. All of these are important also in setting the theoretical foundations of science communication. But this phrase occurs just once in Cohen's treatise. He settles on “citizen scholar” as his guiding concept, rather than public science, public communication, or even publics.

The recent literature on these latter topics is hardly mentioned. Perhaps most surprisingly, Cohen does not engage with the social sciences applied to communication, specifically the burgeoning work on audiences. As a quantitative sociologist Cohen might have been drawn towards the increasingly detailed analysis of segments and sub-segments of audiences. But he is not thinking about strategic behavioural goals, and thus not of strategically targeted publics.

Cohen's is a bigger picture, in which academic experts are active in the “public square” (his phrase), being accountable and reflexive, with all the uncertainties and risks that this brings. He seeks to model this in conceptual terms, offering tables and diagrams as an aide to understanding. But he also proposes many practical recommendations, neatly summarised in numbered lists, as they apply to various topics.

Whether he is talking about open-access and preprint publishing, the vagaries and possible extensions of peer review, the perils of using social media, or the challenges of activism for an academic, Cohen's generally sound advice comes back to a few principles — be open, be honest, be humble, be careful and caring, be clear about your role, and be clear about your limitations. All of this applies to the natural scientist in public engagement as it does to the social scientist. In strongly and repeatedly linking openness with trustworthiness Cohen is contributing valuably to current discussions on science-society relations: “People need to see our open practices, our shared data and code, and our willingness to admit mistakes”.

There is strong advice in an early chapter titled *Doing Description*. Here, Cohen stresses the value of the expert's well-grounded account of what is actually going on as a basis — perhaps — for suggestions as to how things might be done differently. Empirical reporting, he writes, should come before explanation or prescription: it is “vital because the veracity of what follows depends on its correspondence to observable reality”. Cohen also stresses the value of “straightforward empirical contributions” over excessively sliced and diced statistical data; in his criticism of such research and publishing trends Cohen is saying something that deserves also to be considered in science communication.

A chapter on peer review in academic publishing outlines the relatively short history of the current model and how this has been “fetishised” and “captured by Big Publishing”. Cohen offers a picture of peer review that is extended well beyond the tightly controlled but manipulable practices of the scientific journals to include the commentaries of academic bloggers, dedicated review web sites and journalists. He details later his own experience of improving a paper as it was reviewed and rejected in various settings before eventual publication.

On social media Cohen sets out the pitfalls and dangers in detail but also insists “we don't have a choice” because the possible collaborators are already there and social media can keep social scientists in touch with relevant communities beyond those with which they are in direct contact. In this chapter, however, Cohen deploys extensively a technique that does not sit well with his repeated calls for openness and transparency. The testimonials he cites on social media experiences come from people he describes as “Eugene, a tenured white male English professor” or “Richard, a forty-something white male economist in the non-profit sector”. Lauren, Jennifer, Candice, Sophie and others are described in similar terms and we have no way of knowing if these are real people. Could Cohen not have secured their permission to name and situate them?

This is a work of advocacy more than analysis, so some concepts and connections are perhaps less fully explored than I might have liked. Cohen has his eyes fixed on a set of ideas and practices that he espouses and does not pause to consider others that are closely related, such as citizen science and scientific citizenship, engaged and participatory research, and patient and public involvement (PPI) in research; these are left to others to pursue.

I would have appreciated further reflection on the rich notion of public intellectual but I am happy to adopt Cohen's brief summary of what it means: “To be a public intellectual today requires being both public in one's intellectual life and intellectual in one's public life”.

About the author

Brian Trench is a writer and editor specialising in science communication, formerly programme leader in the Masters at Science Communication, Dublin City University, Ireland. He was president of the PCST Network, 2014–21. He is co-author with M. Bucchi of *Science Communication — the basics* (Routledge, 2025) and co-editor with M. Bucchi of the *Routledge Handbook of Public Communication of Science and Technology* (2008, 2014, 2021).

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