# Of Process and Platforms

## Building a «Public Engagement Toolbox»

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So much of what we think of as «public engagement» boils down to getting people into a room: a theatre, a recording studio, a workshop, a museum. When, in early 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic suddenly transformed how (and where) we worked, taught, and socialised, many of the established modes of academic public engagement had to be rethought. As the public engagement officer on the Council of the Society for Renaissance Studies, an interdisciplinary organisation for early modernists working largely in the UK and Ireland, my brief was to think about what the Society's public engagement work might look like at a time when our members, like the wider public, were largely confined to their homes.

Forced to scrap our plans for roadshows, training workshops, and public events, the idea that took shape in spring 2021 became what we called the «Public Engagement Toolbox» (PET): a growing set of free-to-view online resources which showcase best practice in public engagement across Renaissance and early modern studies. Largely composed of informal interviews recorded over Zoom, the aim of our PET was not so much to advertise projects and engagement activities by leaders in our fields, but rather to explore the *how* of successful public engagement. What kind of knowledge, networks, and practices underpin effective engagement work?

The PET reflects, first and foremost, the range of innovative public engagement going on in and around UK universities.[1] The project director of the ERC-funded project «TIDE: Travel, Transculturality, and Identity in England, c. 1550–1700», Nandini Das, for instance, offers advice on how early modern research can have impacts in the policy sphere.[2] Catherine Fletcher, author of a number of successful popular history books, gives tips on pitching and writing trade non-fiction while also reflecting on how universities perceive the value of more public-facing work.[3] A number of contributors offer their thoughts on how universities and funders value different kinds of public-facing work – a recurrent concern among public engagement practitioners in UK academia.[4] Resources available through the PET share best practice around social media, TV and publishing, museums and heritage, the use of apps for public engagement, using historical sources as the basis for walking tours, and more.

One immediate reflection prompted by the range of materials available through the PET, even at this early stage in its development, is that while a number of these projects meet – or were shaped by – institutional definitions of «impact», others are more slippery and difficult to fit into the rubrics which have come to shape much academic public engagement in the UK context in recent years.[5] For instance, one project featured among the PET conversations is «A Bit Lit», a multi-disciplinary platform for conversations, debates, and creative works begun by early modernists in lockdown. How best to value the creation of a platform and the hosting of conversations in a landscape which still privileges the researcher or team «engaging» the public with their own sources or findings? In the age of the Zoom seminar, how can we better value this work of facilitation and platforming? Other conversations remind us of the different forms of knowledge and labour that underpin successful engagements – the work of archivists, activists, developers, and others whose expertise is essential to so much engagement work.

But is this publication? In the context of this special issue of *traverse*, and in the broader conversation about how we value public engagement work, this is a reasonable question. I would say that in one sense the PET represents a pushing back against the output-focused model of public engagement which dominates in UK institutions and funding bodies. While many contributors to the PET have produced concrete work in the form of reports, programmes, books, and articles, our conversations work to shift the discussion away from thinking about engagement in terms simply of its visible results, and to shine a light on the nuts and bolts work behind it. In this, it follows the argument made by historians Laura King and Gary Rivett in 2015, when they called for a model of public engagement which is «much more focused on the process of engagement rather than the end-product, though the results cannot be divorced from the engagement itself, whose value often lies in this process, the relationships and collaboration rather than the end change».[6]

In keeping with this, the focus of our PET conversations is on process rather than output. While these are conversations that celebrate excellence in public engagement, they are at heart an exercise in the sharing of skill and knowledge. Every successful public engagement project is built on the knowledge and networks of the researcher(s) behind it. In some cases, the outputs emerging from these projects make explicit the creative and conversational processes that underlie them.[7] But too much knowledge and experience around public engagement remains locked up in institutions, teams, and individuals, often for want of appropriate venues for sharing this kind of knowledge.

The desire to make our findings public – and as public as possible – is a laudable one. But making our *processes* public, and sharing with other academics the skills and setbacks of a public engagement project, is important, too. This is good

practice, and it contributes to the training and knowledge-sharing that should be central to our scholarly lives. With engagement work increasingly central to funding bids and career progression in the humanities, having researchers reinvent the wheel where best practice is already in existence is a waste of energy and time. But it also has significant implications for accessibility and equity, particularly where it involves sharing knowledge of systems or institutions which academics may have unequal access to. Among the PET resources are conversations with scholars who walk their colleagues through the processes behind trade publishing, collaborating on museum exhibitions, and pitching TV programmes. Successful engagement in spheres like these can benefit from knowledge and networks which are not easy to come by without the proper contacts: by making process public, some barriers to engagement might become a little less daunting.

So what can this small, young project tell us about the future of academic publishing? What I'm arguing here is that this approach, based on informal conversations that focus on process over output, on creating a platform for talking about *how* rather than *what*, might inspire us to think anew about celebrating and sharing our public-facing work. As historians and scholars, we are used to debating and refining our methodologies in public. Our findings are worth little unless we can explain their methodological underpinnings, and in turn share knowledge and techniques that inspire our colleagues. At the same time, a re-evaluation of what constitutes «public engagement» is overdue for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the changing role of outlets and platforms that facilitate the sharing of knowledge and skills which can help our discipline(s) become more accessible and, ultimately, more thoroughly publicly engaged.

*Notes*

1 The Public Engagement Toolbox can be accessed at www.rensoc.org.uk/education-outreach/public-engagement-toolbox (20. 1. 2022).

2 www.rensoc.org.uk/impacting-policy-with-early-modern-research-with-nandini-das (20. 1. 2022).

3 www.rensoc.org.uk/pitching-writing-trade-nonfiction-with-catherine-fletcher (20. 1. 2022).

4 For a recent perspective on how proposed changes to UK research funding risk impacting public-facing history writing, see Suzannah Lipscomb, «Open Access, Closed Minds», *History Today* 71/8 (2021), www.historytoday.com/archive/making-history/open-access-closed-minds (20. 1. 2022).

5 For a critique of the UK's «impact agenda» from the perspective of the historical profession, see Laura King and Gary Rivett, «Engaging People in Making History: Impact, Public Engagement and the World Beyond the Campus», *History Workshop Journal* 80 (2015), pp. 218–233. Data compiled by the Royal Historical Society from the Impact Case Studies submitted as part of the 2014 Research Excellence Framework draw attention to the overwhelming predominance of male Principal Investigators, and the disproportionate focus of these impacts on modern and UK or European history: https://royalhistsoc.org/analysis-ref2014-impact-case-studies.

6  King, Rivett (see note 5), p. 227.
7  For an example, see Karen Harvey, «Envisioning the Past: Art, Historiography and Public History», *Cultural and Social History* 12/4 (2015), p. 527–543.