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Speaking With, Not For

If our research never gets out of the ivory tower, then who is it helping, asks Jackson Wright Shultz.

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By [Jackson Wright Shultz](#)

Recently, I gave a reading at a local independent bookstore for my new book, *Trans/Portraits: Voices From Transgender Communities*. The book uses an oral history framework to examine the daily lives of 34 transgender and nonbinary individuals. I fell in love with oral history in no small part because it is such an accessible genre. It allows interviewees to talk about their lives in their own words -- a rarity for routinely silenced minority communities.

After the reading, I fielded questions as a short queue filed up to my little signing table. The audience that evening was primarily composed of nonacademics, so most of the questions were expected. Yet one inquiry gave me pause. An older gentleman asked me, "If you're really an academic, why did you write for a general audience?"

In the brief time it took to sign his copy, I could not thoroughly explain my rationale for the tone of the book and correct his assumption that all things academic need be labyrinthine. I simply posed a question of my own: "If my research never gets out of the ivory tower, then who is it helping?"

He replied with the most noncommittal of grunts. Guess you can't convince everyone.

I have always understood research to be about gathering new information and furthering human knowledge. I wonder, then, why my academic colleagues' eyebrows shoot up into their hairlines when I say I try to write my research for a lay audience, or when I show dissent regarding academic paywalls. It is often assumed that because I buy in to higher education, I, too, am supposed to blindly buy in to academic elitism. "B-b-but," they splutter, "You went to *Dartmouth!*" as if attending an institution of repute is a character flaw.

If anything, my Ivy Leaguery served to radicalize me against academic exclusivity by continually reminding me, as Robert L. Reece writes, [of the sacrifices of education and social class transcendence](#). By no means do I think that academe should encourage or promote elitism, nor do I think that research must be so needlessly complicated that it becomes inaccessible to those without an advanced degree. And I am [hardly alone in this belief](#).

While I believe that nearly all research should be made accessible to a nonacademic audience, this is even more crucial when writing about marginalized communities. Perpetuating barriers of information access by using highly specialized writing would further marginalize the very population on which my research focuses. Furthermore, research about a population should be directed *by* that population.

Research on trans communities, in particular, has frequently left trans voices out of the equation. Recently, even [popular television shows and movies about trans people have failed to seek input from trans people](#). In undertaking this project, it was vital to me that I include voices and stories that, even within trans spaces, are frequently excluded from the dialogue. As the adage goes, "Nothing about us without us."

My lay writing style is response to, and a small stand of resistance against, the historical lack of access that trans people have had to the means of production of the dominant culture. Whereas much of the literature about trans and nonbinary communities was written with little to no input from those communities -- from medical and psychological texts to historical works by trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) -- I am a firm believer that new research should provide an opportunity for trans and nonbinary individuals to shape this scholarship in meaningful ways.

In writing an oral history of transgender experiences, I relied upon a number of other trans and nonbinary people (both in and outside of academe) to help guide my work, and I can't help but wonder why this is not a standard protocol for all. Some of my colleagues regarded this as unnecessary at best and as a potential compromise of research at worst. Certainly, it would compromise results in clinical trials to allow patients to review and edit their files, adding unnecessary bias to a supposedly objective process.

But in fields where constructivism and subjectivity reign supreme, our work often stands to gain from engaging in a process of subject review before submitting for peer review. After all, as a queer, first-generation trans student from a working-class, blended family, this process *was* a form of peer review, albeit less scholarly.

As a researcher, I didn't want to speak *for* a population, I wanted to speak *with* them. In order to do this, it was necessary to check my privileges and biases at every step of the research process, to receive feedback from a variety of editors who could help ensure I was doing justice in my representations, and to carefully change identifying details to ensure confidentiality while preserving authenticity. While **there were parallels between my own experiences as a trans person and my research findings**, I deeply recognized that I was not speaking for myself, but instead lending my platform as an academic to a broader conversation -- and allowing this dialogue to be governed by an all-too-often silenced demographic.

I do not know whether the man from the bookstore was an academic himself, but I do know that his surprise that an academic would intentionally write for a lay audience speaks volumes about the ongoing inaccessibility of research. I wonder, then, why I don't see a larger push to increase research access -- not just by protesting academic paywalls-- but also by truly examining the language and methods we use for conducting and conveying our work. Who are we serving by making our research inaccessible? Is it less valuable if an eighth grader can understand it? Could crowdsourcing feedback from lay audiences improve the quality and accessibility of it?

I cannot definitively answer those questions, but I can wager a guess that the inevitable rebuttal to them will be steeped in a fear that publishing for a general audience will lead to oversimplified research and the demise of intellectual rigor in academe. I disagree. For those of us who embody the intersection of academia and activism, we must acknowledge that intelligence comes in a variety of forms, not all of which are suited to GRE vocabulary, and we must likewise write our research with accessibility in mind. The complexity, rigor and nuance of our work need not to be sacrificed; we merely need to create accessible outlets for conveying complicated information. Just as **grammar snobbery** has no place in activism, neither does research elitism.

BIO

*Jackson Wright Shultz is an activist, educator and the author of **Trans/Portraits: Voices From Transgender Communities**. As the education director for the **Trans Education, Activism, Community & Health (TEACH) Alliance**, he has spoken throughout the country on contemporary issues in transgender communities. When not working with the TEACH Alliance, Shultz teaches composition and creative writing courses at New England College. He is an alumnus of Washington State University and Dartmouth College, and is a current doctoral student at New England College.*



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BACK TO TOP



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