Wanted: Humanities Communicators
Alan Liu

February 15, 2024

The need for inspiring, public-facing communicators of the humanities who can effectively engage a wider public to promote the values and substance of the humanities has never been more pressing. So, too, supporting the professionalization and placement of such communicators in society could provide much needed additional career pathways for today's humanities personnel. Inspired by analogy with the publicly effective field of "science writing" and "science communication," I am thus co-leading with Christine Henseler (Union College, NY) a new initiative called the [Center for Humanities Communication (CHC)](#) whose goal is to ask the questions:

- What actually is humanities communication?

- What are the humanities communicator positions in society today?

- How can humanities academic programs as well as organizations beyond the academy support the professionalization and training of humanities communicators?

Of course, communicating the humanities has its own unique set of challenges, such as framing the humanities' "usefulness" between the intrinsic and instrumental, past and present, Western and global, curatorial and critical, and other polarities easily exaggerated in a polarized society. But the comparison with communicating science is useful because of "SciComm's" widespread recognition as a professional field with a training track closely linked to that of science itself. Researchers preparing to be scientists can participate in science communication courses, conferences, organizations, and other support structures in universities; and they can also take certificate-granting training programs outside the academy. Training in science can thus optionally include training for a variety of public-facing science communicator roles in media, science-related organizations or agencies, and research science itself--the latter famously instanced by such noted scientist-communicators (and/or advocates) as Rachel Carlson, Carl Sagan, Stephen Hawking, and so forth who fused the work of science to that of showing, telling, and reflecting on science.

Can we complement graduate and postdoc training in the humanities with a "humanities communication" professionalization pathway similar to that of science communication? After all, there are both traditional and new roles for humanities communicators spread out across a broad range of institutions, social sectors, and jobs. As tabulated under the heading of ["Workforce"](#) in the National Academy of Arts & Science's Humanities Indicators project, these positions are far more various than those of the "scholar," "instructor," or research "author" narrowly associated with training in the academic humanities. And there are broad talent pools waiting to be matched up to those roles. One pool of special concern consists of humanities graduate students and early-career scholars who train for academic positions but would benefit from alternative career opportunities in public humanities organizations, the "GLAM" sector (galleries, libraries, archives, and museums), foundations or grant agencies, print media and new media organizations, non-profits and NGOs, and other areas of the workforce. Another talent pool to tend with special care is that of young people from diverse backgrounds whose interests in

media, popular culture, and social causes might be steered toward engagement with the humanities (e.g., through internships in social-media content creation for national or community humanities initiatives). And yet another talent pool to attend to as society ages demographically is that of elders and retirees with a passion for the humanities who might be thrilled to help mentor young people training in humanities communication.

What is needed is a more *structured training framework* for humanities communication and *shared open resources* for the work of humanities communicators. That is the vision we are working on at the Center for Humanities Communication, where we are conceiving of training programs and shared digital materials and tools. In this vision, institutions of higher education can create professionalization opportunities similar to those in SciComm to bring their humanities graduate students into contact with journalists, science writers, publishers, designers, social media content creators, public relations specialists, and others; train them in new modes of collaborative project work and public-facing communication using today's digital and other work platforms and tools; and provide recognition and career progression for entry-level or early-career jobs in the burgeoning ecosystem of "alt-ac," "RSE (research software engineer)," "postdoc," "intern" and other alt- or para-academic humanities positions. In this vision, too, humanities-related organizations, professional associations, and foundations beyond the academy can provide complementary training and support.

Nearing the end of my career as a humanities scholar who has written mainly pure scholarship--while contributing only the fabled 25th hour of each day to the public humanities--I think that beginning a Center for Humanities Communication is how I would like to end. At the end of the day, I want to know "what actually is humanities communication?" and how can we support it?