

Editorial: Sharing knowledge in the spirit of Humboldt

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Abstract

This editorial introduction provides an overview of the design of the 2019 Biennial Symposium of the Australian and New Zealand Associations of von Humboldt Fellows, which took place at Macquarie University, 22–24 November 2019. Under the theme “Sharing Knowledge in the Spirit of Humboldt,” the conference provided a space to reflect on Humboldt’s legacy as a research communicator and to engage with contemporary challenges of research communication, dissemination, and impact.

Introduction

2019 marked the 250th anniversary of the birth of Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859) and Humboldtians around the world took the opportunity to reflect on Humboldt’s legacy. Humboldt Fellows in Australia and New Zealand came together during their biennial symposium (Macquarie University, 22–24 November 2019) to focus specifically on Humboldt as a research communicator in order to explore contemporary challenges related to research communication. These challenges relate to ongoing transformations of the academy brought about by the digital revolution, academic capitalism, and globalisation.

Humboldt as research communicator

Humboldt was not only a pioneering researcher, explorer and thinker but also an extraordinary research communicator. His book *Views of Nature* (2011 [1850]), for example, became an international bestseller, was translated into eleven languages, and continues to be published and widely read even today. In addition to his academic publications, he maintained a global correspondence: in one year alone, 1856, he wrote around 4,000 letters, which was both

“a great burden and a great joy” to him, as his friend Rahel Varnhagen noted in her diary (Schwarz, 2018). Additionally, he was a passionate and popular public speaker: in Berlin, his public lectures held everyone enthralled, were the talk of the town, and made headline news. In Paris, he was the star of the salons and his half-hour talks — sometimes as many as five in one evening — dazzled fellow researchers and the fashionable world alike (Wulf, 2015).

Humboldt also pioneered science as spectacle through his organization of academic conferences, and his relentless lobbying for the renovation of Berlin’s observatory or the construction of a zoo open to the public (Daum, 2018).

Humboldt lived at a time when the nature of knowledge itself was undergoing massive transformations. These included the popularization of knowledge as science came within reach of the emerging middle classes or the commodification of knowledge as science became an object of bourgeois consumption (Daum, 2018). While certainly independent of Humboldt, Humboldt’s research and, even more so, the ways in which he communicated his research, fed these transformations throughout Europe.

Contemporary challenges in research communication

As in the early 19th century, the nature of knowledge itself is being transformed yet again in fundamental ways in the early 21st century. During Humboldt's time, scientific enquiry and rational thought became foundational to the constitution of knowledge. Today, we see the relegation of science to one opinion among many, in debates over matters ranging from climate change to vaccination.

During Humboldt's time, the challenge for researchers was to develop new channels through which to communicate knowledge. Today, the challenge is for researchers to make their voices heard in the noise of social media communications, which have created an "infodemic" every bit as dangerous as the Covid-19 pandemic in which we find ourselves (Zarocostas, 2020).

During Humboldt's time, science was the domain of bourgeois white men who had just cut knowledge loose from the shackles of Latin and communicated in the burgeoning national languages of Europe. Today, the legitimacy of the white male voice is being questioned but scholars from the global South, non-white scholars, women and scholars from non-English-speaking backgrounds are still struggling to gain authority in the academy (Piller, 2019a).

In the face of these challenges in research communication, the 2019 biennial symposium of the Australian and New Zealand Associations of von Humboldt Fellows aimed to rethink what "sharing knowledge" means in today's world. It was a forum for debating the role of academic publishing, media engagement, social media, academic networks, interdisciplinary collaboration, and the increasing linguistic and cultural diversity of the academy.

The 2019 Humboldt Symposium

To this end, the 2019 Humboldt Symposium had "Sharing Knowledge in the Spirit of Humboldt" as its guiding theme. This theme was addressed in five panels, which constituted the core of the academic program:

- Panel 1: Sharing knowledge through science communication;
- Panel 2: Sharing knowledge in a diverse world;
- Panel 3: Sharing knowledge beyond the academy;
- Panel 4: Sharing Knowledge between the Humanities and Sciences: Ethical treatment of the dead and dying;
- Panel 5: Sharing knowledge through academic networks.

In keeping with the conference theme, the symposium included a range of other formats, too. These comprised a public lecture, a series of eight speed talks, and an interactive workshop devoted to sharing knowledge through media engagement.

The academic program was complemented by a social program consisting of a welcome-to-country ceremony, a reception and concert with songs from the German Romantic Period, and a conference dinner in the iconic sandstone castle Curzon Hall, a converted former monastery. Additionally, the conference featured a visual artist, Sadami Konchi, who sketched conference participants. On social media, the Symposium was accompanied by a lively Twitter presence. Under the hashtag [#AvHMQ](#), hundreds of tweets were published before, during and after the conference.

To view the full program, abstracts, photos, sketches, and tweets, see the conference report (Piller, 2019b).

The Special Issue

This special issue brings together some of the papers presented at the conference. Gabrielle McMullen, the president of the Australian Association of von Humboldt Fellows, opened the conference—and this special issue—by introducing Alexander von Humboldt as extraordinary research communicator. One of our keynote speakers, Professor Ingrid Gogolin, Hamburg University, also took her key from Alexander von Humboldt and examines how his lesser known ethnographic research was shaped by and continues to shape ideologies of national identity as expressed through national monolingualism.

Their papers are followed by a series of case studies of research communication in various contexts. Another of our keynote speakers, Professor Dietmar Höttecke, Hamburg University, examines who counts as expert and how trust is established in the debate over safe levels of nitric oxide emissions.

In another case study, Adrian Dyer, S.R. Howard, and J.E. Garcia show how they have been able to boost the impact of their research by strategically communicating through a variety of channels and flanking the traditional academic journal paper with a concerted promotion campaign in more widely accessible media. How to reach wider audiences is also the topic of the next case study, where Nathan Kilah describes a school outreach project in his field of chemistry. Although chemistry is often perceived as an advanced science, he shows that it is possible to share its fascination even with students as young as primary school age.

The next two case studies move away from research communication with the wider public and consider researcher-to-researcher communication across disciplinary and geographical boundaries.

Alexandra Grey and Laura Smith-Khan show how early career researchers identified a research gap related to language and the law and successfully built a research network connecting isolated researchers in the field. John Hearshaw introduces the International Astronomical Union, which aims to promote global collaboration in astronomy.

The special issue ends with a research paper in which Ronald Clarke re-visits Anfinsen's dogma in chemistry of "one sequence, one structure."

Abstracts of all conference presentations are available in Piller (2019b).

Acknowledgements

In the name of the Australian and New Zealand Associations of von Humboldt Fellows and all the conference attendees, and in my role as the conference chair, I gratefully acknowledge generous funding from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation to make the "Sharing Knowledge in the Spirit of Humboldt" symposium and this publication possible through their "Humboldt Kolleg" program.

We also wish to express our gratitude to Emeritus Professor Robert Marks and the Royal Society of NSW for taking on the publication of this special issue.

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