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“W.E.B. DuBois for the 21st Century:  
On Being a Scholar-Activist in the Digital Era”

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**ABSTRACT:** W.E.B. Du Bois began his work as a scholar-activist at the dawn of the twentieth century, and this paper argues that his example has much to teach contemporary scholar-activists in the twenty-first century. In order to publish *The Crisis*, the magazine of the activist organization he co-founded, DuBois purchased a printing press. This meant he could own the means of his own knowledge production and foretold both the promise of what it means to be a scholar-activist in the twenty-first century and the limitations built into the current systems of knowledge production. Du Bois was also prophetic when he identified the problem of the twentieth century as “the problem of the color line,” as the focus of both his scholarship and his activism. The forms of systemic white supremacy we face today are both a continuation of a centuries-old dimension of racism in the U.S. and part of an emerging media ecosystem powered by algorithms. The paper explores the challenges of being digital scholar-activists within legacy institutions. It concludes with speculation about what DuBois might do now.

**Keywords:** DuBois, scholar-activist, white supremacy, knowledge production, open access

**Word count:** 6,038

## **Introduction: DuBois 20th Century Scholar-Activist**

The lynching of Sam Hose in 1899, a young, black man in Georgia shocked W.E.B. DuBois. Hose had been accused of killing his employer, a white man who had drawn a gun on him and threatened to kill him. Hose, who had been chopping wood, swung the axe and connected with his attacker's head, killing him instantly. Then, Hose ran in terror. For ten days, mobs of white people chased Hose through the Georgia countryside. White-owned newspapers ran stories about the hunt, and when Hose was finally captured, those same papers ran advertisements for his public and execution. A crowd estimated at two thousand white people gathered in Newman, Georgia to watch while Sam Hose was stripped, tortured, dismembered and his body burned. White souvenir hunters fought over parts of his body that were soon for sale in Atlanta stores (Goldstone, 2011; Wells, 1996).

DuBois earned his PhD at Harvard just four years before the cruelty and public spectacle of Hose's lynching made DuBois reconsider the value of his work as a scholar. In his autobiographical essay, *Dusk of Dawn*, he writes "One could not be a calm, cool, and detached scientist while Negroes were lynched, murdered, and starved; and secondly, there was no such definite demand for scientific work of the sort I was doing" (DuBois, 1940/2017). As he lost faith in his writing as a scholar, DuBois became more engaged in writing for the public sphere, which was the beginning of his scholar-activism. The title of this piece poses a question about what Du Bois would do now, and I contend that Du Bois' example as a scholar-activist at the dawn of the twentieth century has much to teach us about being scholar-activists in the twenty-first century.

When Sam Hose was lynched, Du Bois was a thirty-one year old assistant professor at Atlanta University. That same year, he wrote articles that appeared in national magazines, such as *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The Independent*, the first of many pieces he would pen for a general audience over the next many decades of his career. In 1910, DuBois resigned his faculty position at Atlanta University in order to work full-time for the activist organization he co-founded, the NAACP. His primary responsibilities included writing, editing and publishing the magazine, *The Crisis*. The magazine was geared toward the general reader and sought to focused attention on lynching and other forms of systemic racism in the US. Within a year of its launch, the circulation for *The Crisis* grew to 120,000, and became his “major vehicle for sociological scholarship and activism” (Morris, 2015: 135). Perhaps most important for this re-telling, DuBois bought a printing press that he and colleagues used to produce the magazine. In many ways, DuBois’ prescient purchase of a printing press foretold both the promise of what it means to be a scholar-activist in the twenty-first century and the limitations built into current systems of knowledge production. Du Bois was also prophetic when he identified the problem of the twentieth century as “the problem of the color line,” yet the forms of systemic white supremacy we face today are both a continuation of a centuries-old dimension of racism in the U.S. and part of a media ecosystem powered by algorithms.

### **White Supremacy in the 21st Century**

If Du Bois were a scholar-activist in the current century, he would be fighting systemic racism. And, those challenges would have a familiar ring because white supremacy in the twenty-first century can be similar to that of the previous century.

On almost every available sociological measure of structural inequality, the U.S. remains a white dominant society, and that results in systemic harm to all others (Feagin & McKinney 2005). The educational system in the U.S. remains as segregated as it was for most of DuBois' life, with some new dimensions added to it. In K-12 schools, schools are more racially segregated now than they were in the Jim Crow South (Hannah-Jones, 2014; Lewis-McCoy, 2014; Orfield and Eaton, 1996). The rise of neoliberalism and the defunding of public higher education have clashed to create the twin tragedies of student debt and sham, for-profit colleges that disproportionately take advantage of students of color (Cottom, 2017). At the same time, elite Ivy League institutions of higher education continue to benefit from the wealth accrued through slavery (Wilder, 2014), and college campuses throughout the U.S. still have confederate monuments (Cordell, 2017). At every level of education attainment, the payoff in terms of employment and income is significantly greater for whites than for any other racial or ethnic group. For instance, in 2014, the median adjusted household income for African Americans with at least a bachelor's degree was \$82,300 compared to whites with the same educational level, which was \$106,600 (Pew Research Center, 2016). It is through housing that most Americans change income into wealth, and here again, whiteness translates into material advantage. The average white family has accumulated an estimated thirteen times more wealth (\$144,200) than the average Black family (\$12,200) (Pew Research Center, 2016). This inequality in housing drives a number of other dimensions of systemic white supremacy, including damage done to

health (Williams and Collins, 2001) and ongoing discrimination in public accommodations (Anderson, 2015; Feagin, 1991).

The current political landscape does not repeat history, but it does rhyme with what DuBois experienced. Just five years after DuBois launched *The Crisis*, the filmmaker D.W. Griffith screened his film, *Birth of a Nation* (1915) at the White House for President Woodrow Wilson, who is quoted in the film. President Wilson declared the film “history writ with lightening.” The film, of course, is recognized as the one that launched an art form and an industry; and it is also widely regarded as propaganda for the KKK. Almost a century later, a new brand of racial terrorists with the same ideology have found an opportunity in the innovation of digital technologies. In the 1990s, avowed white supremacists like David Duke and Don Black saw the potential of the Internet to crowdsource hatred and undermine hard-won political victories through plainly hateful sites like Stormfront and more pernicious cloaked sites like MartinLutherKing.org (Daniels, 2009). In the twenty-first century, violent white supremacists can use search engine algorithms to find racist propaganda, map the location of a Black church, and execute nine people at a Bible study, as one did in Charleston, South Carolina (Noble, 2018). And, in 2017 when neo-nazis gathered near a college campus to rally around a Confederate monument and they killed one woman and seriously injure nineteen others, the current resident of the White House calls them “very fine people” (Daniels, 2018).

Today in American society, there are extra-legal murders but not in the style of the lynch mobs that hunted, tortured and killed Sam Hose. Instead, we have built institutions, strategems, and cultural narratives to ensure that violence is enacted on Black and Brown bodies as a matter of routine. The police regularly kill with impunity

(Chaney and Robertson, 2015; Embrick, 2015). The drug war and “gang affiliation” push the dehumanizing fiction that some people are disposable (Reinerman and Levine, 2004; Hing, 2018). Mass incarceration, solitary confinement, state executions (Alexander, 2012; Davis, 2011), the border patrol, detention centers, and ICE raids (Chacón and Davis, 2018) destroy lives, families, entire communities to make white people feel safe in a world they created. If he were here, Du Bois might spot some new verses added to twenty-first century white supremacy, but he would certainly recognize its familiar tune.

What DuBois referred to as “the color line,” we might today refer to as white supremacy and it remains a defining political and moral crisis in our society. Along with it are any number of interlocking social problems, including climate change, sexual assault and harassment, the gun control, and the rise of authoritarian regimes. In each of these domains, there are scholars with years of training and study of these issues and who could elevate the public discourse, even change the terms of the debate (Coppock, Ekins, et al., 2018). Scholars engaged in timely, relevant research want to slip off the “calm, cool and detached” pose to become scholar-activists, those who are engaged in the creation of knowledge as an emancipatory project tied to activist goals rather than simply the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Yet, scholar-activists today confront a very different reality than the one DuBois encountered.

### **Digital Scholars, Legacy Institutions & Publishing Cartels**

Our habits as scholars and activists are shaped by digital technologies in ways that were simply not possible in the century that DuBois inhabited. In the twenty-first century, we are all digital scholars. Even if our research has nothing to do with digital

technologies, their use has changed how we do the work of being a scholar. Few, if any, scholars today use card catalogs to locate bound journals in locked stacks within set hours of a brick-and-mortar library; instead, most use a combination of online search tools to access institutionally-supported databases at any time. If the *sine qua non* of being a scholar is creating knowledge, then this central endeavor is changing in all its component parts. The way scholars acquire and create knowledge, the mechanisms by which we find and read others' work in our field, the way we manage the citations, where and when we evaluate the work of our peers, the ways we collaborate, where and how (and sometimes what) we publish - all of these scholarly practices are being altered by digital technologies (Daniels and Thistlethwaite, 2016; Weller, 2011).

For activists, digital technologies are also changing how we engage in protest. Even for those of us who prefer a hand-lettered sign held aloft to an online petition for our activism, it is likely that we have ordered the poster board and marker from an online store and someone else has reached out to others on Twitter to join us in holding the signs (Tremayne, 2014; Tufekci, 2017). And, how we engage in scholar-activism, and how we measure the effectiveness of that work, have been transformed by the spread of digital technologies (Daniels and Thistlethwaite, 2016). Yet, unlike DuBois, those doing the work of scholar-activists today neither own the means of production nor the knowledge products we create. We are, all of us, digital scholars within legacy institutions that limit our activism.

Moving, remixing, sharing, and circulating information in digitized form is easier and faster than in analog formats. Just as the ctrl+x, ctrl+v commands of cut and paste make it quicker to move text around than typing, scissoring, re-arranging and pasting,

other forms of digital activity allow for easier distribution and redistribution of text and all variety of media. This shift from analog to digital continues to have profound implications for everyone who does knowledge work, including those of us in the academy. Specifically, what I intend by the terms legacy and digital scholarship is not a binary but rather a matrix of practices and intended audiences. Legacy scholarship refers to two connected sets of practices: analog publishing (print on paper) and a small, select audience consisting of only those from a scholarly world who share a similar training and background. Under the legacy model, authors mainly work in solitude to research and synthesize text for publication in printed, bound books or journals intended for, and only available to, other scholars with privileged access to them through university libraries and databases. Digital scholarship refers to two connected sets of practices: knowledge production, distribution and pedagogy that use Internet technologies, and that assumes that whatever form the knowledge takes that it will speak to both scholars and to those beyond the walled in academy (Stein and Daniels, 2017). In many ways, DuBois was the original digital scholar although he used analog tools. For instance, Du Bois had his students at Atlanta University create sixty ink and watercolor infographics to illustrate his research for *The Georgia Negro*, which told the stories of the descendants of enslaved peoples for the general public audience at the 1900 World's Fair in Paris (Quito, 2017). As a scholar and activist, DuBois was interested in knowledge creation and dissemination as an emancipatory project.

### *Legacy Institutions & Publishing Cartels Run Counter to Being a Scholar-Activist*

The twenty-first century scholar-activist who is interested in the emancipatory project of knowledge creation and dissemination faces a set of barriers that DuBois did not have to contend with. The rise of digital technologies in scholarly work has brought with it expectations of openness, yet these collide with legacy institutions in the grip of neoliberal economics and the cartel of academic publishing.

Anyone who works in higher education today knows first-hand that we are experiencing a “neoliberal war on higher education” (Giroux, 2014). The cuts to public funding, the trend toward privatizing services, maximizing space utilization, the decline of full-time faculty and rise of the precariat of adjunct labor, taken together mean that generating revenue becomes the script for how to run the university. As just one example, the Educational Advisory Board (EAB), a consulting firm to higher education institutions in the US and Europe, identifies faculty as standing in the way of the profit-centered goals around the use of physical space, for as the EAB describes it, “faculty hoard facilities, refusing to give up or share space they do not need for fear they will not be able to get it back when needed” (Educational Advisory Board, 2010). These were not among the problems that DuBois confronted when he organized the annual series of conferences on race at Atlanta University (Morris, 2015). Aside from the physical space in which we work as scholars, the places where we publish are also governed by neoliberal logic.

Scholars today are compelled to keep their work locked behind paywalls, and therefore not accessible by anyone without an academic institutional affiliation. In the early days of the popular Internet, there was some hope that the “hi-tech gift economy,”

as it was called, would usher in a 'new economy' that was an enlightened form of social democracy (Barbook, 1998). This mix of community, reciprocal labor and modest monetary backing, as demonstrated in open software communities and virtual communities like THE WELL, shared a fundamental value that information and labor should be shared freely for the common good (Turner, 2005). This expectation of openness and sharing work for the common good has carried forward into how we think about all kinds of digital work, including our scholarship. There is an easy shareability built into digital practices (e.g., "ctrl+x, ctrl+v," or "right click to download"). In addition, academic librarians actively try to reduce digital barriers to research articles and ebooks by using software that facilitates the appearance of access for those with credentialed logins. All of this can be mistaken for true openness, that is, work that we own the rights to and can share as we like. Yet, these expectations of openness and shareability of our work collide with legacy institutions and the cartel of academic publishers that make enormous profits.

Five academic publishers — Elsevier, Springer, Wiley, Taylor & Francis, Sage — account for the majority of all the scholarly articles published, some 70% of social sciences articles (Larivière, Haustein and Mongeon, 2015). That's a dramatic increase from the 1970s when those five publishers accounted for only about 10% of all scholarly articles, a much different publishing environment than the one DuBois encountered. Since the 1970s, mergers and acquisitions and more mergers have led to an oligopoly of academic publishing. Profit margins for these commercial publishers have grown steadily over the past twenty years. In 2011, the journal publishing divisions of Elsevier, Springer, and Wiley reported profit margins equal to 36%, 33.9%, and 42%, respectively

(Bergstrom et al., 2014). Jiménez and colleagues note that academic publishers' profits are higher than those in several other industries, including oil, (Exxon Mobil has a net profit margin of 7.31%), diamonds and minerals (Rio Tinto's profit margin is 13.69%), and even banking (JP Morgan Chase claims profits of only 24.57%). They conclude wryly: "Volunteered academic labor, it turns out, is a far more lucrative platform for profit accumulation than fossil fuels, mineral resources, and international finance" (Jiménez et al., 2015). These profits are creating a serials crisis that threatens to strip-mine the budgets of academic libraries.

The serials crisis is one of the great ironies of the turn to digital scholarship, but it is important because it highlights the stranglehold on scholarly work by publishers and the lack of investment from legacy institutions. The "serials crisis" simply refers to the huge increases in the cost of scholarly journals; and, for most academics, this is a hidden cost unless they serve on committees that deal with library budgets. The switch to digital formats from print actually lowers production costs, but publishers have dramatically raised journal subscription charges. Prices for library journal subscriptions have risen at significantly greater rates than have indexes of consumer prices. North American research libraries expenditures on journals increased 402% between 1986 and 2011 (Kryllidou, Morris and Robuck, 2012). The average yearly cost for a library to subscribe to an academic journal in 2015 was over \$1933 (Bosch and Henderson, 2015). In the UK, journal expenditures account for over 65% of library budgets (The Economist, 2011). Commercial publishers see an opportunity to profit and to proliferate subscriptions with "big deal" package pricing structures. For example, much like cable tv companies bundle more and less desirable channels into "packages" at different price

points, academic publishers will offer the top thirty journals in a field, plus a thousand other less prestigious journal titles. Publishers restrict *a la carte* subscriptions to individual journal titles. One analysis of such practices found that these amount to a kind of “price discrimination” (Bergstrom et al., 2014). Others have gone farther, arguing that the current academic publishing may violate international antitrust laws (Edlin and Rubinfeld, 2004). Even librarians at the deeply endowed Harvard University lambast academic journal publishers for creating a “fiscally unsustainable” situation (Sample, 2012). At the very least, this model of publishing is an oligopoly — a market structure in which a few firms dominate. And, the big five academic publishing firms may, in fact, constitute a cartel — a form of oligopoly in which members collude to fix prices and production. Whether simply an oligopoly or actually a cartel, everything about this model of publishing runs counter to being a scholar-activist. And, legacy institutions operating within neoliberal regimes are unlikely to fill in these gaps in library budgets hollowed out by publishers, but this wasn’t always the case.

“What is accomplished if the work of a lifetime grows moldy in the drawer of a desk?” asked Charles Scribner, a commercial publisher and a founder of Princeton University Press (Hawes, 1967, p. 35). For commercial publishers of the 19th century, like Scribner, saw a value in academic work, even if there was little hope for profit. Scribner and other commercial publishers recognized that the potential audience for most academic work was too small, and the costs to publishers too high, to turn a profit. However, they also recognized that there was value in the knowledge academics created and that it would be lost if the marketplace were the only arbiter of whether or not it got published. In the 19th century, innovators like Scribner proposed that the

university should take on the job of publication itself and thus, many university presses were formed to augment the dissemination of the knowledge created by faculty (Abel et al., 2002). In DuBois' era, Atlanta University took on the cost of the publishing the proceedings of his annual conference. Of course, in both Scribner's and DuBois' time, there was general agreement that a university is valuable as a place where knowledge is created. The function and value of the university as a place where knowledge is created is now contested (universities are now "hedge funds with a school attached"). This divestment in university presses and publications undermines not just scholarly work, but scholar-activism.

For scholars, the legacy model of publishing serves a legitimization function. Publishing articles in highly ranked, peer-reviewed journals or books with prestigious university presses remain the coin of the realm in academia. If an aspiring scholar wants to get hired, tenured or promoted, this is the currency they must use. To be sure, professional legitimization may contribute to a long-term, often post-tenure recognition as an expert in one's field and thereby one could contribute to ongoing activism (Stein and Daniels, 2017). But waiting until tenure to engage in activism is not an appealing option for many scholars, particularly scholars of color who may view issues of racial justice as quite urgent (Matthew, 2016). Yet, the scholar-activist working today confronts real constraints on the conditions of their knowledge labor.

Unlike literary authors, journalists, filmmakers or any other cultural workers, academics do not get paid directly for published work. Instead, faculty members with full-time, tenure-track employment (a shrinking minority) are compensated for some combination of teaching, research, and administrative work. When it comes to

publishing, academic authors are expected to operate in a 'gift exchange' culture, in which we 'donate' our written work to academic publishers for free (Borgman, 2007). While some academic book publishers offer small payments (in advances offset against future royalties), most do not. When publishing in academic journals, faculty are never financially compensated. Instead, faculty perform unpaid, and often invisible, labor in the form of peer review of others' work for journals, work that typically does not get acknowledged. Work such as serving on journal editorial boards, and even editing journals, is also unpaid but does show up on academic resumes (or, curriculum vitae). In exchange, we receive the publishers' copy editing, formatting, and distribution of our work, and we get the credential of a peer-reviewed publication to add to our list of accomplishments. This line of academic credibility gets translated back into the currency that academic institutions understand and reward through mechanisms like hiring, tenure, and promotion. However, all of the calculation of trading our labor for professional legitimation only works for the small minority of faculty who are on full-time, tenure-track lines. For the growing majority of faculty who work as adjuncts, they are compensated for teaching (only) and thus, any entry into the "gift" economy of academic publishing is for them, an entrepreneurial venture. It is a gamble on the promise of future, full-time work, which will compensate them for such labor. Whether full-time or adjunct, all of us have been beguiled into handing over the copyright to our work.

Unlike many other cultural workers, academics do not usually hold the copyright to our own work. Instead, we are asked to sign away all the rights to our work to publishing houses, whether journals or book publishers. And those terms and conditions are almost never in the author's favor. The standard copyright agreement gives away

almost all of the author's rights to the work to publishers. In most of these agreements, for-profit publishers retain authors' copyright "in perpetuity," meaning until the author's death and beyond. The only ways to circumvent this are to not publish or to make special, non-traditional contractual arrangements. The first is not an option for most, and few academics know how or why to bother with the latter. Thus, for academic authors the cartel publishing model offers a reliable form of credentialing within legacy institutions, but it trades on uncompensated labor, enriches commercial publishers, and leaves authors without the right to freely distribute their own work ever.

Profiteering commercial publishers are not alone in creating this crisis; scholarly societies are implicated in this, too. Academic professional associations have come to rely heavily on the financial return provided them by commercial publishers. Typically, the circulation and revenue numbers for scholarly journals are closely held secrets even within the association among dues-paying members. Most members have no idea how much revenue is generated by the journal they support with their dues, nor do they know how many readers there are for that journal. As fewer universities reimburse for increasing society membership fees, this may shift and members may demand more transparency and accountability. To the extent that professional associations are tied to legacy publishing models, they may offer a leg up on legitimation for some scholars but they are antithetical to activism or to social change. For DuBosian scholars interested in dismantling systemic white supremacy in higher education, scholarly associations are ripe for critique for perpetuating the very kind of exclusion and social reproduction that prevented DuBois from receiving the professional recognition due him while he was alive (Morris, 2015).

*Why are you doing this work?*

I began to understand all of this shortly after my book second book, *Cyber Racism* was published in 2009. That year, I was invited to do an interview about the book on a live, call-in radio show hosted by a grassroots, anti-racist organizer. During that on-air interview, a young man called to confront me. He was angry because I had, a few days prior to the call, asked him to remove a pirated copy of my book he had posted on his website, which he refused to do. At the time, I believed I was doing the right thing when I contacted the blogging platform he used and reported him for hosting an unauthorized e-version of my book that anyone could download. Then, he asked me this crucial question: “Don’t you want people who can least afford it to read your work? If not, then why are you doing this work?” His question, “why are you doing this work?” became a clarifying moment for me. And, once I recovered from the humiliation of being called out publicly, I reevaluated my relationship to copyright and whose interests it served.

After that call, I realized how misguided my attempt at enforcing the copyright protection for “my” book had been. My goal in writing the book was to have as many people read it as possible, including those who could least afford it. It is a scholarly book about white supremacy, that also has activist aspirations. But going after this young man for his violation of copyright law was not in my interest nor his. Instead, it was serving the interests of the publisher who now owned the copyright to the book I thought of as mine. I finished that book while teaching as an adjunct, and so I very much needed the legitimation function the book provided. And, in an ironic twist, it was

through the process of legitimation that I learned just how “not my own” books I had written could be. When I submitted my materials for tenure and promotion, the requirements stipulated that I include six copies of all my publications, including my (then) two books about different aspects of white supremacy. The only way to comply with this institutional requirement for promotion was go to an online commercial retailer, purchase six copies of each “my” books at a cost of approximately \$450. It was clear to me then that I no longer owned my own work. This realization that I no longer owned my own work, and the pressing question about why I am doing this work, lead me to a whole new field of activism around knowledge production. While I was struggling to sort through what I thought of as my personal troubles about how to share my work, these were, in fact, a set of public issues about the knowledge production in the academy.

Many scholar-activists and organizations had been working on this set of issues for decades before I discovered them. In 1991, Paul Ginsparg set the arXiv repository (<https://arxiv.org/>) at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in order to make research in physics freely accessible to anyone. In 2001, the Budapest Open Access initiative convened scholars from around the world around the idea that when research is available “free and unrestricted online” – or, Open Access (OA) – it enlivens the public good (<http://www.budapestopenaccessinitiative.org/read>). That same year, the Creative Commons was launched to offer an alternative to outmoded copyright and offers a new “global infrastructure for sharing” (<https://creativecommons.org>). In 2012, the “academic spring” of the open access movement began when Tim Gowers, a Cambridge mathematician frustrated by paywalls, wrote a blog post in which he effectively resigned from the academic publishing cartel, or at least part of it. In that post, Gowers declared

he would no longer submit to or review papers for any academic journal published by Elsevier (Gowers, 2012; Jha, 2012). Shortly afterward many followed his disavowal of Elsevier through the website “The Cost of Knowledge” (<http://thecostofknowledge.com/>). At the site, academics signed on to a declaration of non-support for Elsevier; and, as of this writing, it has garnered over 17,000 signatories (Neylon, 2012). In 2014, an organization called the Author’s Alliance began as a way to help authors manage the rights to their work, including “rights reversion” for authors (like me) who have signed away the copyright to their work and wish to get it back (<https://www.authorsalliance.org/resources/rights-reversion-portal/>). Making scholarly work available on digital platforms is only partially open, at best, if large corporations own those platforms, and that is the issue that the network of Platform Co-Operatives (<https://platform.coop>) seeks to address by encouraging the creation of owner-run digital platforms that do not rely on a corporate cloud. Until 2016, sociology as a field has been behind on adopting open access; then, with the launch of SocArXiv (<https://socopen.org>), a non-commercial platform for social scientists to upload working papers, pre-prints, published papers, data, and code, sociology took a leap forward.

For me, the question of that young man posed to me, “why are you doing this work” reverberated with the kind of doubts DuBois had when he felt “there was no such definite demand for scientific work of the sort I was doing.” For aspiring scholar-activists, meaningful public engagement is obstructed when the knowledge we create is permanently locked behind paywalls and outmoded copyright laws.

## DuBois for the Twenty-First Century

DuBois, the scholar-activist of the first half of the twentieth century, offers some guideposts for scholar-activists how to move forward in this century. As a scholar, DuBois spent his decades of research investigating the systemic racism, whiteness, and white supremacy, and that has never been more urgent. As an activist, DuBois' creation of *The Crisis*, a magazine with a general audience in mind, suggests that we must look for ways to reach a wider audience. The fact that DuBois purchased a printing press to publish his magazine, suggests that we should look for ways that we can have more control over our own knowledge production. And, the fact that DuBois left Atlanta University, and ultimately left the U.S., to pursue his activism, suggests that we must continually re-evaluate what we gain from legacy institutions, what we give up by remaining in them and when we make take our leave from them. The twenty-first century presents has ushered in a digital era in which new circuits of knowledge production mean both different forms of white supremacy and emergent opportunities for scholar-activists who want to resist, dismantle, and replace it.

There is a rising cohort of DuBosian scholars who are fluent in the use of digital technologies and committed to use them for their scholar-activist projects. This contingent of scholars are from different generations but share a commitment to activist engagement and the use of digital technologies when useful. For instance, Abigail Sewell created the Race and Policing Project as a way to a compile peer-reviewed resources as a response to ongoing brutality (Sewell, 2016). At Black Feminisms, Melissa Brown produces a website of scholar-activism that centers the work of Black women, feminism and intersectionality (Brown, 2018). In 2016, in a project that went

from a hashtag, to a syllabus, to an edited volume, scholars Chad Williams, Kidada Williams, and Keisha Blain produced the *Charleston Syllabus: Readings on Race, Racism, and Racial Violence*. Following the racist murder of nine people at a church service, a hashtag of mourning and outrage, turned into a trending topic, a crowd-sourced reading list, and ultimately, an academic book title. These scholar-activists took a born-digital knowledge creation project and transformed it into a product that is legible within legacy institutions. And, in response to the trend of online syllabi, Alyssa Lyons created the Hashtag Syllabus Project, a digital project that reimagines curricula for activists hoping to bridge the gap between theory and practice (Lyons, 2017). Lyons hosts her project at the Racism Review, a blog that Joe Feagin and I launched more than ten years ago, as a non-commercial platform for scholars who want to engage wider audiences about issues of race and racism (Feagin and Daniels, 2007).

Much like the printing press that DuBois bought to publish *The Crisis*, digital technologies offer new opportunities for scholar-activism. However, doing so requires navigating around the cartel of academic publishing and deciding what, if anything, we need from legacy institutions. Legacy institutions do not now, and perhaps never will, recognize the value of activism connected to scholarship. The academic publishing cartel that is siphoning funds from academic libraries is at odds with open scholarship and the public good. To dance around both legacy institutions and the academic publishing cartel, scholar-activists must look for opportunities to create knowledge that connect with and improve the lives of communities beyond the tiny number of peer-reviewers for whom most of our work is intended. Scholar-activists can work to build their own non-commercial platforms, advocate for open access policies in your

department, institution, and scholarly associations. At the very least, scholars who want their work to be read can use Sherpa-ROMEO ([www.sherpa.ac.uk/romeo/index.php](http://www.sherpa.ac.uk/romeo/index.php)) to assess the rights policies of scholarly journals, and post your pre-print papers at a repository such as the SocArXiv, so people beyond this small circle of other academics can find your work, otherwise, why are you doing this work?

## **Conclusion**

For DuBois, the publicly advertised lynching of Sam Hose prompted him to feel there was little value in being “calm, cool and detached” when the such a reign of terror against his people.

We who live in the U.S. in the first half of the twenty-first century, are alive in a time and place in which white supremacy is ascendant and the extralegal murders of Black and Brown people are now recorded on cell phone video and repeated again and again for public consumption. Many of us wanting to take some action but wonder, as DuBois did, “where is demand” for the kind of work you do.

The example of DuBois offers us a model, and a series of challenges, for today’s would-be scholar-activists. As a model scholar-activist, DuBois was chiefly concerned with knowledge creation and dissemination as an emancipatory project, as when he commissioned infographics illustrating his research for the public attending the 1900 World’s Fair. Unlike the analog tools DuBois’s students used to create these, today’s digital technologies make such artifacts much easier to construct. However, the cartel of academic publishing, with hyper-inflating costs, closed distribution and privileged access, serves the narrow interests of publishers more keenly than the interests of globally-networked scholars. Scholar-activists now must also contend with the demands

of the neoliberal university in which cuts to public funding, the decline of full-time faculty and rise of the precariat of adjunct labor, the trend toward maximizing everything including the physical space of the university mean that generating revenue, rather than creating knowledge, has become the imperative for how to run a university. The unprecedented potential digital networks have for the creation and distribution of knowledge by scholars is at odds with the legitimation function of legacy institutions and the profit motives of publishers.

DuBois as scholar of racism and white supremacy would certainly recognize its familiar tune in the current era, and here he offers us another guidepost. Our colleges and universities are currently beset by groups of racial terrorists who want to turn back hard-won political, social, cultural victories against white supremacy and intimidate those engaged in this struggle. One of their favorite weapons of choice is to use digital platforms to attack scholar-activists. DuBois, if he were among us today, would surely be a digital scholar-activist engaged in the fight against white supremacy.

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