Writing fiction as scholarly work

Writing for academic publication is highly stylised and formalised. In this post **Rob Kitchin** *describes how writing fiction has shaped his own academic praxis and can provide scholars with an expanded range of conceptual tools for communicating their research.*

"The usual approach to writing an academic article or book is to produce a factual, discursive narrative that weaves together theories, observations and findings, contextualising the contentions made with respect to the existing literature. The voice is most often in the third person, formal, impassionate and distant. The aim is to create a convincing, evidence-based argument in a neutral register that displays a strong degree of objectivity.

I've written plenty of such accounts, which are usually impersonal, full of jargon and conceptual musings, and aimed at academic peers. To all except those peers, who possess sufficient scientific literacy and knowledge of the wider literature to make full sense of the material presented (and who might even become enthralled by it, though probably not), the material is dry and somewhat impenetrable. Consequently, students and lay readers can feel disconnected from the texts and find them difficult to decipher. Even scholarly trade books, which seek to employ a more lively voice and translate the arguments into a more accessible register, can be hard work for lay readers who have a passing interest but little deep knowledge of a topic or field.

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In contrast, storytelling is inherently a more engaging and accessible register for communicating ideas and providing a critical lens to reflect society. Short stories, novels, comics, documentaries, biographies, television dramas, animation and movies provide media that can be more provocative and playful than academic accounts. They can set out different views and explore values, conflict and consequences, using various forms of narrative devices, such as metaphor, allegories and analogies.

For example, science fiction uses extrapolation and speculation to explore possible futures given present trends. In particular, science fiction employs the tactics of estrangement (pushing a reader outside of what they comfortably know) and defamiliarisation (making the familiar strange) as a way of creating a distancing mirror and prompting critical reflection on society, now and to come. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is a long history of academics drawing on the imaginaries of science fiction in their analyses, and also science fiction writers using academic ideas in their stories – a relationship examined in the book Lost in space I co-edited with James Kneale.

Academics, though, have typically shied away from writing fiction as a means to formulate and communicate their ideas, with the exception of a handful of scholars (mostly in the social sciences and humanities). This seems a shame given the power of storytelling to engage and inspire readers. In my own work, I have become increasingly drawn to fiction and more creative forms of academic writing (data stories, blog posts, op-eds, documentary scripts, vignettes, biography, etc.) as a means of more effectively conveying an idea or a debate, or to explain a particular phenomenon or process.

In a paper published in Cultural Geographies in 2014, I discussed how ten different forms of writing (fiction, blog posts, newspaper op-eds, email correspondence, policy papers, policy consultation, a television documentary script, powerpoint slides, academic papers and grant applications) had been used to perform public scholarship aimed at informing citizens and policy and media debates about planning and housing aspects of the financial crash in Ireland. The writing praxes employed built on and fed off each other to create an assemblage of interlinked pieces that worked in different registers for multiple audiences.

More recently, I co-edited a book with Mark Graham, Shannon Mattern and Joe Shaw – How to Run a City Like Amazon, and Other Fables – in which the contributors used short stories to explore what cities would be like if they were run by, or used the business model of, different companies. Using fiction enabled authors to employ estrangement, defamiliarisation and speculation to cast light on the implications of the present drive to create smart cities and to marketise and privatise public services. The result was a set of salutary tales that say something meaningful and insightful about the world, but in a more inventive and engaging way.

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In February, my book Data lives: How Data are Made and Shape our World will be published. It consists of a mix of 27 interconnected short stories and biographical essays that collectively illuminate the data lifecycle and the consequences of living in a data-driven world, and set out the key ideas underpinning the new field of critical data studies. The stories are purely fictional tales or modified dramatisations of real events. The biographical essays mix memoir, anecdote and analysis. Both the fiction and non-fiction are rooted in my own experiences, though they also draw from extensive wider research and reading. Rather than writing from a detached academic position, the book employs a different kind of voice and point of view to personalise the narrative with respect to both the writer and reader.

Some might be wary of this approach, casting it as 'unscientific'. It's certainly the case that the arguments presented are not based on the use of a rigorous, systematic, scientific method involving a representative sampling frame, impartial and rote analysis, and impassionate, descriptive interpretation (though the projects they describe are). However, I would contend that it does not render the arguments invalid or without useful insight. Nor does it mean that the material and examples discussed are unrepresentative. Rather, what is presented are richly illustrative of situations and processes that I have witnessed many times in my work building data infrastructures, contributing to data policy and government committees, and undertaking fundamental and applied research, and will be familiar to those who regularly work with data, or are concerned with how data affects our everyday lives. Crucially, though, the academic ideas and thesis developed, including high-level theory, are presented in a lively, accessible and familiar way to readers.

In a post-truth age, where the academy is struggling to convince politicians, media and the public to engage with and heed its work, fiction and more creative forms of academic writing have the potential to open up new avenues to reach readers beyond academia (and provide more accessible pedagogical texts for students). They therefore seem worthy of more attention by academics as media to communicate and promote their ideas and findings than has been the case to date."

This post first appeared as *Writing fiction as scholarly praxis, on the Transforming Society* blog.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our Comments Policy if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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