Sociological Images: Blogging as Public Sociology

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Abstract
Sociological Images is a website aimed at a broad public audience that encourages readers to develop and apply a sociological imagination. The site includes short, accessible posts published daily. Each includes one or more images and accompanying commentary. Reaching approximately 20,000 readers per day, Sociological Images illustrates the potential for using websites as a platform for public engagement in the social sciences. This report provides an overview of the site’s history, approach, reach, and impact. The authors also discuss some challenges facing academics interested in blogging for a general audience and some of the features that contribute to the popularity of the site.

Keywords
public sociology, blogging, teaching, Internet, social networking, academia

Sociological Images is a website designed to encourage the public to develop and exercise a sociological imagination through brief discussions of compelling and timely imagery. Founded in 2007, the site is now one of the most widely read blogs devoted to the social sciences. In this report, we—the editors and authors of the website—describe the site and its reach and impact; discuss how it can be used as a resource by instructors; and offer an overview of the website’s history and philosophy, including what we believe to be the strengths of our approach and the challenges we face as authors and editors.

Overview of Sociological Images
The front page of Sociological Images features a contrasting black and white color scheme with sharp red accents, including a bold Sociological Images logo. The page draws the reader immediately to the most recent blog post. Horizontal tabs below the logo allow readers to navigate between the home page of the website, “trending” or popular posts, a collection of editors’ favorites, material for instructors (discussed below), and an “In the News” page that collects references to Sociological Images and its authors in the media. A side bar offers readers opportunities to learn more about the

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blog or the authors and contributors, subscribe to the Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feed, and browse the blog by one of 164 tags that span the breadth of sociological inquiry (from abortion to work). A press kit is available to journalists. To increase access and users’ ability to share content, social networking features are integrated into each post, allowing readers to easily share posts by clicking the appropriate icon for Facebook, Twitter, or Google+.

Between one and three new posts are added to the blog every day; today the site’s archives include over 4,000 posts. Because the goal of the website is to use images to illustrate social science concepts, each post includes a visual; this may be a graph, table, print advertisement, TV commercial, billboard, magazine cover, comic, product, short film clip, or depiction of an art project. While some posts include little commentary, especially those with easily understood graphs or tables that simply summarize data, authors typically use visuals as anchors for discussions grounded in social science research. In some cases, images are tied to scholarly work. For example, a post summarizing Brumberg’s (1997) history of narratives connecting teen girls’ personal hygiene to morality featured vintage soap advertisements that included overt connections between cleanliness and personal worth (Sharp, 2008). Other posts draw on sociological concepts in a more general sense, applying a sociological lens to provide a deeper understanding of the contents or effect of an image. The concept of the feminine apologetic, for instance, was used to explain the significance of a calendar featuring female politicians from the Czech Republic in stereotypical sexy pinup poses (Wade, 2010b).

Sociological Images engages readers by involving them in the generation of the content itself. The majority of posts are based on items submitted by readers to an e-mail address; readers submit 15 to 20 items per day, on average. Posts written in response to these submissions always contain a prominent attribution to the submitter/submitters. Involvement of the readership in this way has undoubtedly been key to the site’s success; not only does it ensure a steady stream of content, but it creates a personal connection to the site and engages readers more actively in applying the sociological perspective as they look for relevant examples to submit. Many submit repeatedly in the hopes of having an item featured, and some have even mailed print items when they were unable to find electronic copies.

Reach and Impact
Sociological Images was founded in 2007, quickly gaining a large and devoted readership. In 2011, the site was visited over 7 million times, for a total of 11.4 million page views. In addition, it is followed by over 20,000 individuals subscribed by RSS feeds, which are not counted in the site’s page view numbers, as well as over 16,000 readers via Facebook, over 7,000 on Twitter, and over 10,000 on Pinterest, a website that functions as a digital bulletin board. Almost 3,000 sites link to Sociological Images (Alexa, 2012).

People who never visit the main website or its auxiliary incarnations may still be exposed to Sociological Images’ material. The blog enjoys partial syndication at a number of websites and blogs, most notably Ms. and Jezebel. Jezebel, owned by Conde Nast, is a website aimed at women that receives millions of visits every month. Sociological Images content has been reposted at Jezebel 68 times. Ms., the venerated feminist magazine now published by the Feminist Majority Foundation, has featured Sociological Images posts on its website 23 times. The blog’s content also appears on websites such as Racialicious, Adios Barbie, Love Isn’t Enough, the French News site Owni, and in Portuguese at a blog hosted by the University of Brazil, Conhecimento Prudente. In 2011, we were invited to serve as guest authors for 2 weeks at Scientopia; 16 posts appeared at Scientopia and were cross-posted at Sociological Images.

Because of its reach, Sociological Images provides a unique platform from which to increase awareness of social science research. For instance, Amy Schalet reports that a Sociological Images post about her research drew the attention of journalists who later helped publicize her book (Wade,
2010a). Mary Nell Trautner and Erin Hatton (2011) wrote a guest post about their research on increasing sexualization of women on the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine. As a result of its popularity, Ms. is currently considering writing an article about it for their print magazine.

The site has also been instrumental in social change. Most notably, a short post discussing a push-up style bikini top sold by Abercrombie Kids, a store targeting children and teens aged 7 to 14, asked, “At what age should girls start trying to enhance their cleavage?” (Wade, 2011). Readers mobilized to get the item removed from stores. Within a week the product had been removed and Abercrombie had released a statement via Facebook, saying, “We agree with those who say it is best ‘suited’ for girls age 12 and older” (Abercrombie Kids, 2011). The Abercrombie post had an unusually powerful effect, but Sociological Images routinely receives e-mails and comments from public relations departments of companies responsible for advertisements or products that are analyzed on the site.

As a testament to its relevance, the site has been reviewed in academic journals—*Teaching Sociology* (Mayeda, 2010) and *Visual Studies* (McCormack, 2011)—and featured in the *Contexts* podcast (Contexts, 2009). Sociological Images has also been profiled by media industry sites such as Change Marketing (Megginson, 2011) and widely respected nonacademic publications, most notably *Bitch* magazine (Kazunas, 2008) and the website of *The Atlantic* (Coates, 2010). The site has also received or been nominated for awards from the Pacific Sociological Association (granted, 2009), the American Sociological Association Section on Communication and Information Technologies Public Sociology Award (pending), the Pop Culture/American Culture Association (nominated, 2011), the American Sociological Association (nominated, 2011), and the University of Minnesota Department of Sociology’s Public Sociology award (granted, 2012).

As a result of the attention Sociological Images draws, its writers are often used as sources or quoted by news outlets. The *In the News* page includes over 100 links to appearances in media outlets including National Public Radio [NPR] (O’Neill, 2012), CNN (Sagers, 2011), *The Atlantic* (Sehgal, 2011), *TIME* (Szalavitz, 2010), ABC News (Braiker, 2011), *The Columbus Dispatch* (Feran, 2011), *The Atlanta Journal Constitution* (Boone, 2011), *The American Prospect* (Bouie, 2010), and the *San Francisco Chronicle* (Yang, 2009).

**Features for Instructors**

Sociological Images offers three features aimed at helping instructors use the site in their course preparation: sample assignments, course guides, and a Pinterest board. Course guides consist of lists of posts organized to follow standard syllabi for frequently taught sociology courses. Readers are invited to submit guides for courses or to accompany specific books or articles.

To provide easier and faster browsing of images, in December 2011 we created a number of image collections on Pinterest. All of the more than 8,000 images and videos featured on Sociological Images have been uploaded. Pinterest allows visitors to browse through the content in the form of medium-sized thumbnails, with no accompanying text. Clicking on any image takes the viewer directly to the full post at Sociological Images. In addition to the main board, there are 11 special topic boards that include images related to a specific concept, such as social construction of race, heteronormativity, sexy toy makeovers, gendered parenting and housework, and the Great Recession.

**Readership and Referrals**

Compared to the demographics of all Internet users, the Sociological Images readership is disproportionately young (between 18 and 34 years old), female, and college educated, with annual incomes of less than $60,000 (Alexa, 2012). Most readers reside in the United States (49%); the most
common other locations are Western Europe (~15%), Canada (10%), India (5%), and Australia (2%) (Alexa, 2012).

Readers come to Sociological Images from a wide variety of places. Many come directly to the site as part of their online routine, visiting regularly to see new content. Others arrive at the site indirectly through search engines; during 2011, for example, 8,650 visitors reached the site after searching for the phrase “Irish stereotypes,” 2,471 when searching for “Disney princess,” and 2,112 while searching for precariat, a term for the economically precarious working class. Some traffic comes from social networking sites. Sociological Images has Facebook and Twitter accounts, and each day all new posts are shared as links and often reshared by users; over 700,000 visits in 2011 came from Facebook and almost 50,000 from Twitter.

Another significant source of readers is other websites that draw their readers’ attention to Sociological Images with links. In 2011, Feministing and Jezebel each brought almost 50,000 visits; links from Boing Boing attracted 25,000. Finally, content aggregators designed to point readers to interesting items on the web often lead to visits; there were over 35,000 from StumbleUpon and almost 125,000 from Reddit in 2011. While the traffic from such aggregators is unpredictable, they have at times brought tremendous attention to the site. When Sociological Images was less than a year old, a post became popular on Reddit, leading to a massive increase in visits (Wade, 2008). The site received over 45,000 visits in less than 2 days as a direct result of the Reddit link; given that Sociological Images had a monthly readership in the low thousands at that time, the power of aggregators as drivers of Internet attention is evident in this case.

History

Lisa Wade started Sociological Images in July of 2007 at Blogspot (now Blogger), a website offering free blog publishing. The initial imagined audience did not include nonprofessionals; instead, the blog was envisioned as an online space where professors and teaching assistants could swap visual materials they used in classes. About six other instructors were invited to post, with no requirements regarding frequency, content, or tone. Early posts included little to no text, on the assumption that readers would immediately understand the material and how it could be integrated into the classroom. Within a few months, the number of bloggers was reduced to two, Lisa Wade and Gwen Sharp, who have remained the primary producers of content for the site.

Sociological Images quickly gained a readership made up increasingly of nonacademics—that is, readers drawn to the site because of an interest in the topics it featured, but who were not using it to prepare lectures or create assignments. Many readers had no current or past connection to the social sciences but were interested in the perspective and the opportunity to participate in discussions of race, gender, and other topics. While some blogs are created with a clear mission and readership in mind, in this case an unanticipated fan base—both in terms of demographics and numbers—led to a reorientation as the writers and readers collectively reimagined what the site could and should be. It was in response to the changing composition of the readership that the site evolved into the blog devoted to public sociology that it is today.

In 2008, Doug Hartmann and Chris Uggen, then the editors of Contexts, a magazine published by the American Sociological Association, invited Sociological Images to be a part of the online presence for Contexts. We agreed and the entire content of Sociological Images was transferred from Blogger to Contexts. When Hartmann and Uggen retired as the editors, they retained control of the website content and in 2010 moved it to an independent site, The Society Pages. With the help of the technical staff at Contexts and the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, Sociological Images became increasingly professional, functional, and multidimensional.
Lessons Learned: The Challenges of Public Sociology Blogging

One significant challenge involves developing a policy for monitoring comments and interacting in the comments sections. Social science research often focuses on contentious issues of difference or inequality. These posts can draw the attention of individuals who are committed to progressive social change, as well as those who are part of the backlash against this change. Our posts on gender inequality, for instance, are routinely praised by readers, but have also on occasion been linked to men’s rights groups, drawing many overtly sexist comments. Similarly, posts on African Americans or other racial/ethnic minorities may lead to openly racist comments.

Readers have different, often contradictory expectations about the degree to which the comments section on a blog written by academics should be a “safe space”—that is, one that bans hostile comments or those displaying racist, sexist, homophobic, or other potentially hurtful perspectives. While we understand the arguments for creating safe spaces for the constructive discussion of race, gender, sexual orientation, and other issues, particularly for those groups who may face prejudice or discrimination, ensuring a truly safe space has proven impossible. Sociological Images posts receive between 500 and 750 comments in an average week; constantly monitoring these comments as they appear on the site, then, is not practical, nor is moderation of comments (i.e., approving each comment before it appears on the site). Likewise, closing all comments threads, a decision that would guarantee that inappropriate comments would never appear on the site, would dramatically alter one of the features that readers most enjoy—the ability to quickly engage with other readers in extended conversations about the material. At the same time, an entirely hands-off approach to the comments allows constructive discussions to be stifled by individuals who simply wish to dominate the conversation, to express hostile viewpoints, or who become embroiled in escalating arguments with one another.

Our current strategy for moderation is the use of Disqus, a free online commenting service. Readers must create a profile in order to post a comment, though they may still comment anonymously. Disqus allows readers to flag comments they believe are inappropriate or problematic. This has improved moderation of comments significantly; rather than requiring us to read through entire comments sections looking for potentially problematic posts, readers bring our attention to such comments, allowing us to more quickly defuse personal attacks and delete inappropriate comments.

Another challenge that faces academic bloggers who engage with a broad audience involves being the target of criticism. Being visible means potentially being the subject of attack. These range from simple insults to threats of violence. Most appear in comments threads, but in some cases angry readers have looked up e-mail addresses to send lengthy rants directly to authors. Our office locations, office hours, and class times are, of course, easily accessible to anyone with access to the Internet (as are, likely, our home addresses). Bloggers, then, should be prepared to receive negative, even frightening e-mails and, potentially, in-person confrontations.

Bloggers must also learn how to handle situations in which their post turns out to be genuinely inaccurate, misleading, or offensive. In the process of writing hundreds or thousands of posts, mistakes are inevitable. On occasion, for example, we have posted material sent in by readers that turned out to be misleading or false (for instance, treating fake or spec advertisements as if they were real). In other cases, we have been incorrect in our interpretation of data, have gotten facts wrong, or have said things that have offended readers. Because blogging is public, such mistakes are highly visible. When they occur, humility is essential. At Sociological Images, the policy toward corrections is to be as transparent as possible; rather than removing such posts, corrections are noted in an update, with the mistake clearly acknowledged.

As Sociological Images has increased in popularity, we have also had to become more comfortable with our role as gatekeepers and editors. Readers currently submit 15 to 20 items per day, many more than can be accommodated on the site. As the number of submissions has increased, we have...
been forced to become more selective. By necessity, we have had to become more comfortable with disappointing hopeful readers. We still, however, are capable of feeling quite badly or nervous about certain editorial decisions, especially, for example, rejecting the submissions of enthusiastic 13-year-olds or well-established senior scholars.

Finally, potential bloggers should not underestimate the time commitment required. Writing is only the most obvious task involved in running a blog or website. A well-run site also demands a great deal of “backstage” work (such as managing tags, moderating comments, attending to aesthetics, and upgrading software and applications). If the site accepts ideas from readers or guest posts, time is spent on the largely invisible but time-consuming work of editing. Finally, a successful blog will raise your visibility, both within your field and outside of it. Being highly visible translates into other potential demands on your time, such as talking to reporters, appearing on television and radio programs, being asked to contribute to other blogs or websites, and responding to inquiries from strangers (e.g., high school students with assignments, graduate students looking for help finding resources, or activists looking for help raising awareness about social issues).

**The Sociological Images Approach: What Works**

In our opinion, several factors are key to the success of Sociological Images. First, every day for over 4 years, readers have been able to visit Sociological Images and find at least one new post. The consistent production of new material keeps readers coming back, while the sheer number of posts raises the blog’s profile.

Second, eclectic content keeps readers interested. A person who came to the blog to learn more about sociological approaches to understanding one topic might enjoy stumbling upon posts addressing dozens of others. The element of surprise is, we believe, part of what makes the blog so fun to read.

Third, posts follow certain guidelines that make them enjoyable to read. Relatively free of jargon, posts are accessible to nonacademics. Authors refrain from using angry or emotional language, differentiating Sociological Images from many activist websites even when issues like discrimination are addressed. Posts offer interesting ideas, but avoid sounding like a textbook or other pedagogical tool. All posts are illustrated, making them more attractive to look at and adding concrete examples of the often abstract ideas discussed.

Finally, engagement with our readership has been an essential element of our success. Much of the content comes from reader submissions, with the submitter clearly acknowledged in the post. For many readers, Sociological Images is “appointment reading,” something they check every single day and look forward to commenting upon. Many know one another from the comments sections and engage in ongoing conversations, including references to their comments on earlier posts. Many readers express possessive feelings about the site; if a commenter too aggressively condemns sociological analysis or the social sciences, for example, readers may tell them to “go away,” saying that Sociological Images is “our space.” In many ways, then, the site functions not just as a source of reading material, but as a community dedicated to a collective engagement with the sociological perspective.

**Conclusion**

While there are many challenges involved with using a blog to disseminate academic ideas to the general public, the success of Sociological Images indicates that there is a strong appetite for such material. Appealing to readers, however, means learning how to deliver social scientific ideas in a palatable way. The authors at Sociological Images have developed an approach that readers seem to savor. Accordingly, it has become a widely read website with a real impact on public discourse.
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