

ARTICLE

Capturing the Signal in Public Humanities

N. Ángel Pinillos 

Arizona State University, USA

Email: napinillos@gmail.com

(Received 10 February 2026; revised 03 March 2026; accepted 04 March 2026)

Abstract

The rapid expansion of digital media has enabled scholars to engage public audiences through blogs, podcasts, newsletters, and videos, producing a growing body of public humanities content. While this democratization of knowledge has lowered barriers between academic expertise and the public sphere, it has also generated a structural discovery problem. Public-facing scholarship is highly fragmented across platforms and frequently obscured by the overwhelming volume of general online content (a classic “signal versus noise” dilemma). Existing discovery tools are ill-suited to address this gap: traditional academic databases prioritize peer-reviewed literature, while commercial search engines privilege popularity and engagement over scholarly relevance. This article discusses publicscholarship.org, a search index launched in January 2026 to aggregate, categorize, and make discoverable public-facing scholarly content produced by credentialed experts for non-specialist audiences. I outline the conceptual framework for defining public humanities content, the operational criteria used to identify scholars and relevant content, and the balance between automation and human curation that enables scalability.

Keywords: epistemology; search index

The contemporary intellectual landscape is currently witnessing an abundance of public humanities content, manifested primarily through widely available digital mediums such as blogs, podcasts, and videos. While this democratization of knowledge is a welcome development, a significant structural barrier persists: the absence of a systematic, centralized mechanism for discovery. This fragmentation limits the potential reach of scholarly work for both general audiences and researchers. To address this discovery problem, I discuss publicscholarship.org, a new search index designed to aggregate and categorize public-facing academic content.

1. Conceptualizing public humanities and modern praxis

For our purposes, I will think of public humanities content as scholarly output produced by experts in their capacity as experts, and yet intentionally designed for non-specialist

This article is about a search index. The author is the founder of this search index.

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

consumption. This conceptualization aligns with the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) framework, which views public humanities as an endeavor to “bring the ideas of the humanities to life for general audiences through public programming.”¹

In the current media ecosystem, the traditional boundaries of scholarly work are being bypassed in at least one way, through certain high-impact and self-sustaining projects. Consider these examples of substantive scholarly engagement as of early 2026:

- *Historical Analysis*: Dr. Heather Cox Richardson utilizes her newsletter, *Letters from an American*, to contextualize political trends, publishing over 70 entries in January 2026 alone to a subscriber base of 2.8 million.²
- *Philosophical Discourse*: Dr. Jared Henderson’s podcast, *Philosophy in the Modern World*, has amassed over 37 million views.³
- *Religious Studies*: Dr. Bart Ehrman’s YouTube channel has attracted over 44 million visitors.⁴

The public success of these scholars, and many others, suggests a shift toward a self-starting model of praxis where academics need not wait for institutional grants or sponsorship to engage the public.⁵ Digital platforms like Substack and YouTube have lowered the barrier to entry, facilitating the consumption of complex ideas.

2. The epistemic problem of locating content

Despite the volume of public humanities content, one obstacle to its efficacy as a public good is the problem of “signal versus noise.” While popular platforms provide a familiar environment for audiences, public humanities content is frequently drowned out by the sheer volume of general content; for context, YouTube adds approximately 20 million videos a day.⁶ Compared to this volume, public humanities content is but a tiny fraction. So how do we find this needle in the haystack?

Existing discovery tools are insufficient for bridging this gap. Traditional scholarly databases, such as Project Muse or JSTOR, are designed for specialists or peer-reviewed papers. Conversely, general search engines like Google and social media algorithms prioritize popularity and engagement metrics, which often obscure newer or less viral but still valuable scholarly contributions. There have been some efforts to catalog public humanities. A leading exemplar is the *Humanities for All Index*, which tracks approximately 2,000 projects, including institutional and immersive exhibits.⁷ However, this scale remains too small, and the updating too infrequent, to capture the rapidly expansive universe of digital public humanities content produced by scholars. This venue, for instance, does not include the humanities content mentioned above.

¹ National Endowment for the Humanities 2026.

² Richardson 2026.

³ Henderson 2026.

⁴ Ehrman 2026.

⁵ This is not to say that the work of many of these scholars did not benefit from institutional support, such as enjoying the security of tenure.

⁶ YouTube 2026.

⁷ Humanities for All 2026.

3. Publicscholarship.org

Launched in January 2026, publicscholarship.org serves as a discovery search index for individual podcasts, essays, and videos created by, or featuring, scholars but made for general audiences. Rather than hosting content, the engine functions as a “Google of public scholarship,” providing metadata (author, title, publication venue, publication date, description, and content type) and linking users directly to the author’s primary site.

Publicscholarship.org is a project headed by academics, continuing a long tradition of university scholars driving the evolution of internet search technology.⁸ Academics are well positioned to notice early shifts in the informational landscape. This is something that is studied by scholars in Media Studies, Communication, Library and Information Science, Science and Technology Studies, Digital Humanities, Social Epistemology, and related disciplines. Academics also typically have access to the technical tools necessary to enhance information access. Historically, nearly every major milestone in information retrieval emerged from academic research.⁹

The platform aims for several core design features:

- *Comprehensiveness and Scale:* The index covers major humanities disciplines found at universities. It includes Art History, History, Religious Studies, Literature, Philosophy, African American Studies, Latino/a studies, Jewish Studies, and related disciplines. It also includes other university subjects in the social and natural sciences, along with the professional fields of Medicine, Law, and Business. Comprehensiveness in one site allows for interdisciplinary connections. As of February 2026, the database contains nearly 50,000 contemporary entries.¹⁰
- *Timeliness:* Many public scholars produce content that immediately responds to current events. In contrast with traditional academic catalogs, which may update monthly or quarterly, a database that tracks public humanities at scale should, therefore, aim to be current. Publicscholarship.org updates daily. Hundreds of entries are added each week.
- *Semantic Search Technology:* The engine utilizes semantic search to understand the conceptual meaning of queries rather than mere syntax. For instance, a query regarding “domestic felines” will successfully retrieve content categorized under “cats,” ensuring a more precise search experience. Users may even enter search words or phrases in languages other than English. However, as of now, the content linked is in English.
- *Accessibility:* The database is free for individual patrons and prioritizes content that is not behind paywalls. The site aims to be accessible to all users by adhering to the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0 at Level AA, W3C¹¹

⁸ PublicScholarship.org 2026.

⁹ The first web search engine, Archie, was developed in 1990 by Alan Emtage and other students at McGill University. This was followed by the Aliweb search engine, made by Matthew Gray at MIT. Of course, Google, was created by graduate students at Stanford. Seymour, Frantsvog, and Kumar 2011.

¹⁰ Precise classification is challenging due to the interdisciplinary nature of the content. Currently, 40% of entries fall under “humanities.” By format, roughly one-third are essays, one-third are podcasts, 15% are videos, and the remainder are a mix of these media types.

¹¹ W3C 2008.

4. Automation and human curation

Creating a comprehensive database of public scholarship presents significant logistical and philosophical challenges. A manual workflow (identifying all scholars and examining their individual works to determine which of them count as public scholarship) is too resource-intensive and prone to subjective bias, even with the help of Large Language Models.

To circumvent these difficulties, publicscholarship.org utilizes a more objective but streamlined method of detecting scholarship. Just as scientific concepts are measured via objective and verifiable markers (e.g., measuring temperature via mercury expansion, or detecting animal stress by measuring cortisol levels), which may sometimes give the wrong results, the platform understands “scholar” and “public scholarship” through detectable criteria:

1. *Scholarship Marker*: The author must possess a doctoral-level degree (PhD, JD, MD, or MFAs for artistic expertise). For authors who studied outside the US, we look for the equivalent of the degrees mentioned (e.g., DPhil, Dr. Phil, etc.)
2. *Format Marker*: The entry indexed must appear in a popular digital format (e.g., Substack [blogs], Video, or Podcast) and must *not* be in a peer-reviewed journal or a site designed for specialist consumption.
3. *Competence Marker*: The content must fall within, or near, the expert’s demonstrated area of competence.

While this methodology still requires human curation to verify these markers, it allows for a manageable and scalable workflow. As the project evolves, the method for detecting public scholarship can change.¹²

5. Longitudinal analysis: distant reading of the public sphere

The aggregation of metadata at scale gives us a powerful instrument for longitudinal research. By centralizing nearly 50,000 contemporary entries across diverse fields, we can move beyond the “case study” model of public humanities to observe macro-level shifts in intellectual discourse. Utilizing machine learning and semantic analysis, the platform allows for the tracking of trends on a week-over-week and year-over-year basis, providing a “big picture” perspective of evolving public scholarship.

These insights are disseminated through a dedicated weekly Substack blog, which reports on these emergent trends alongside “featured elements” that highlight interesting scholarly contributions from the previous 7 days. This synthesis of machine learning and human curation ensures that the public humanities are not only discoverable but also can be seen as a shifting, living ecosystem.

¹² Humans do not curate each item one by one. They curate each “channel” by an author or group of authors. Each channel publishes individual items on a regular basis. Machines collect these daily and upload meta-data to the site. There are currently 700 channels tracked and more are added all the time. Every channel is carefully checked manually by an academic. In addition, there are individual items published which are not part of a channel. Each one of these items is manually verified for public scholarship by an academic.

6. Limitations of the model

We noted above that the human curation of the index appeals to objective and verifiable markers. This leads to trade-offs. This method excludes genuine public scholars who lack advanced degrees and may include individuals with advanced degrees whose output is of lower quality. Nevertheless, this framework provides a reasonable and implementable solution to the discovery problem, ensuring that public scholarship remains a viable and findable component of our shared intellectual culture.

Another challenge comes from trying to ensure that the quality of the entries indexed remains high. Since the content tracked appears in popular media rather than peer-reviewed journals, it lacks traditional academic vetting. It is reasonable to think, however, that the preservation of professional reputation serves as a “natural guardrail” for quality. Within the public humanities, scholars are highly motivated to maintain their standing among both peers and the public.¹³ This reputational stake functions as an informal but rigorous quality control mechanism, ensuring that, even in the absence of formal peer review, the scholarship remains a robust component of our shared intellectual culture. However, I acknowledge that public scholarship may be influenced by what audiences respond to, and this may compromise quality.¹⁴

A final limitation is financial in nature. This search index has been developed as an independent, self-started project with no external funding. It was created and run by scholars with full-time jobs in academia. Unlike commercial search engines or academic repositories supported by corporate entities with deep pockets, this platform relies entirely on the initiative of its developers. While this independence allows the organization to be nimble and ensures that the mission remains focused on the public good, the logistical reality of maintaining a database of this scale (maintaining a technological stack and human curation) requires consistent financial support. Without these resources, it is doubtful whether this, or any other discovery index for public humanities, could be maintained in the long term.

While the democratization of knowledge through technology has birthed a large volume of public humanities content, the absence of a systematic, centralized mechanism for discovery ensures that this wealth remains fragmented and somewhat undiscoverable. The success of figures such as Heather Cox Richardson and Bart Ehrman serves as a vital proof of concept, demonstrating that the public possesses a robust appetite for disciplinary authority when it is intentionally designed for non-specialist consumption. However, without a structural intervention, this proliferation risks being lost to the “signal versus noise” problem inherent in decentralized digital platforms. I examined some ways in which Publicscholarship.org aims to solve this problem.

N. Ángel Pinillos is a professor and the faculty head of philosophy in the School of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies at Arizona State University. He is also the founder of publicscholarship.org.

Author contribution. Conceptualization: N.A.P.

¹³ Barbour and Marshall 2012; Blackmore and Kandiko 2011; Dasgupta and David 1994; Stephan 2012.

¹⁴ Because the database exclusively catalogs English content, scholars from English-speaking nations are overrepresented, even though many international researchers are tracked.

References

- Barbour, Kim, and David Marshall. 2012. The academic online: Constructing persona through the World Wide Web. *First Monday*.
- Blackmore, Paul, and Camille B. Kandiko. 2011. "Motivation in Academic Life: A Prestige Economy." *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 16 (4): 399–411.
- Dasgupta, Partha, and Paul A. David. 1994. "Toward a New Economics of Science." *Research Policy* 23 (5): 487–521.
- Ehrman, Bart. 2026. "YouTube Channel." February 9, 2026. <https://www.youtube.com/@bartdehrman>.
- Henderson, Jared. 2026. "YouTube Channel." February 9, 2026. https://www.youtube.com/@_jared.
- Humanities for All. 2026. "Humanities for All Index." National Humanities Alliance. February 9, 2026. <https://humanitiesforall.org/>.
- National Endowment for the Humanities. 2026. "Framework for Public Humanities." February 9, 2026. <https://www.neh.gov/program/framework-public-humanities>.
- PublicScholarship.org. 2026. "Search Index for Public Scholarship." February 9, 2026. <https://publicscholarship.org>.
- Richardson, Heather Cox. 2026. *Letters from an American*. Substack. January 2026.
- Seymour, Tom, Dean Frantsvog, and Satheesh Kumar. 2011. "History of Search Engines." *International Journal of Management & Information Systems (IJMIS)* 15 (4): 47–58.
- Stephan, Paula E. 2012. *How Economics Shapes Science*. Harvard University Press.
- W3C. 2008. "Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0." W3C Recommendation. December 11, 2008. <https://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG20/>.
- YouTube. "YouTube for Press." February 9, 2026. <https://blog.youtube/press/>.