

# How might universities recognise and reconcile multiple forms of knowledge about the past, and how do different approaches to this potentially inform ideas of the future of Knowledge Production

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## Outline Paper

There is scope for future knowledge production to be informed by feminism, which recognises both multiple forms of knowledge and that Universities do not have a monopoly over its production. Women's Studies, particularly women's history, had its roots in the UK outside the academy in radical politics, community history and the History Workshop movement of the 1960s and 70s and in the recognition that cultural heritage and narratives of the past are central of identity construction and understanding gender inequality. In the 1980s and 90s increasing numbers of women moved into universities and many students and academics were exhilarated by feminist academic research which provided scope for both personal development and political change.

It was within this temporal moment that in 1991 feminist historians established the Women's History Network aiming to straddle the boundaries of academic and non-academic researchers. Similarly there was a strong commitment in academic disciplines such as Sociology and Cultural Studies to work in and with communities and to develop new, different research methods. There was an acknowledgement both that the personal stories and experiences encountered in doing this were politically significant and that, there was a need to break down the hierarchical and sometimes exploitive relationship between the researcher and the objects of their research. Arguably in the new millennium the idea of such politically engaged research has faltered (Segal 2000) under a range of pressures. Some blame the marketization and audit culture of higher education (Evans 2004), the pressures of the RAE (Skeggs 2008) or the growing awareness of the diversity of women's experience and the theoretical turn within academic feminism, which has placed increasing emphasis on discourse and the post-structuralist theory.

If academics involvement in engaged research beyond the academy floundered, in the new knowledge economy (Beck 1999) a multiplicity of spaces and places have emerged within which women's position in society is debated, discussed, interrogated and explored; from museums to Mumsnet, from heritage dramas to the Jeremy Kyle show. If the internet is in many ways an inherently democratic medium (de Sola Pool 1983) then broadcasting is a domestic and feminised one. Since its inception in the 1920s the location of its audience within the private space of the home has shaped the linguistic style, the focus and programming of broadcast media (Andrews 2012).

Within the media –saturated society of the new millennium the decision by the AHRC to fund a number of researchers, to work with the broadcast journalists in the BBC Regions and Nations to source, select and present 1400 WWI stories for its centenary, is an interesting one. The project has produced 100 post-code specific stories for the eleven BBC regions and three BBC Nations that have been broadcast via BBC's regional TV and Local Radio stations and are available on BBC online. The decision to shift the original project title of *Our Place in the First World War* to *World War One at Home*, whilst not welcomed by all, opened up space for engaged research framed by feminist knowledge and questioning. The domestic focus of broadcasting ensured women's war experience was well represented with for example coverage of the politics of food, women's football and the formation of the WI.

Collaboration between academics and the BBC necessitated working across different institutional and professional cultures, which had clashing perceptions of research, knowledge and time management. Initial reflection has identified that although time – consuming earlier face-to-face dialogue, at the metaphorical coalface rather than the higher echelons of the organization, would have facilitated greater understanding of different institutional cultures.

Established professional norms framed different participants' expectations of what constituted a good story; 'academics wanted fine detail and context, journalists wanted a story that grabbed the attention of the audience and good talkers' (Brierley 2014). Many historians still concur with Bérubé's judgement that: 'everyone is entitled to his or her opinion, and yet some opinions are more informed by the weight of empirical evidence and the historical record than others' (2006: 291 quoted Walker 2009). His assumption is that academic history takes precedence over other versions of the past. BBC journalists did not share academics' assumed hierarchies of knowledge; thus local and family memories and histories (which had perhaps been subject to be embellished and airbrushing) competed with academic research for inclusion in many of the broadcast stories. Yet the personal and local stories that journalists uncovered through their work had traces of the women's history that operated beyond the academy in the 1960s and 70s. Thus there was scope for co-produced research and the exchange of ideas and material but this was predicated upon synergies of research interests that not all encountered.

Universities may want to reflect not merely on the creation of knowledge by the but also on the institution's approaches to its dissemination. The BBC, in the wake of recent scandals is seeking to reaffirm legitimacy as a public service broadcaster and acutely aware of the diversity of its potential audience and their situational specificity. Radio or television broadcasters address a range of competing and overlapping local and national communities of listeners and audiences. Shared media consumption constructs communities of individuals who in their homes and cars become part of imagined audience communities (Moore 1998). Aware of this the BBC has subjected WW1 to, what John Ellis describes as contemporary broadcasting culture's tendency 'to work through' issues until it 'exhausts an area of concern, smothering it in explanations from almost every angle' (Ellis, 2000, pp. 79–80). This has led the BBC to produce a multitude of programmes on WWI; whose very existence acknowledges the pluralism of both histories and knowledge of the conflict. This diversity of content has been matched by a plurality of styles, genres and modes of communication needed to engage large audiences who may also be distracted, transitory and resistant to challenging views.

There is therefore potential for universities, considering the future of knowledge production, to be informed by the approaches to knowledge seen in the AHRC and BBC's collaboration over *World War One at Home*.

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