

# People and Places: Research Doesn't Happen in a Bubble

Alyssa Herman and Edcel Javier Cintron-Gonzalez

In this interview transcribed from an episode of the Conversations with GWRJ Authors podcast series, Alyssa Herman talks with Edcel Javier Cintron-Gonzalez about researching and writing her GWRJ article “The Danger of Filter Bubbles and Digital Isolation: Exploring Ethical Research Practices” and why she chose information-seeking behaviors as a topic.

Talking to peers to brainstorm ideas, browsing past journal articles, and leaning on antecedent knowledge are essential steps in creating a *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* (GWRJ) article, according to GWRJ author Alyssa Herman. In this transcript of an interview from the podcast series Conversations with GWRJ Authors, Edcel Javier Cintron-Gonzalez interviews Alyssa about her article-writing practices and highlights the types of research she conducted. Her insightful and detailed responses emphasize how broad the idea of research can be: talking with friends and co-workers; visiting the library; and exploring past articles, TED Talks, and past experiences. These diverse ways of examining a topic show us that no one writes alone and showcase the importance of ethical research practices.

**Edcel Javier Cintron-Gonzalez:** Hello, and welcome to the series Conversations with GWRJ Authors. Today, we're talking with Alyssa Herman about her GWRJ 10.1 (2019) article “The Danger of Filter Bubbles and Digital Isolation: Exploring Ethical Research Practices.” We love to talk about ethical research practices. In this article, Alyssa looks at Eli Pariser's concept of filter bubbles to understand unethical

“**Content research** is a practice we use to find, process, and attribute information we are writing about, including evaluating all information, practicing ethical citation, and recognizing all research as someone’s writing for a particular writing situation” (“Learning Practice: Content Research”).

information-seeking behaviors and research habits by drawing on her past experiences with academic research. In relation to filter bubbles, Alyssa unpacks how we can consciously embrace ethical research and writing practices as responsible writing researchers. Alyssa, thank you so much for being here.

**Alyssa Herman:** Thank you for having me.

**Edcel:** How did you come up with the idea for your GWRJ article on filter bubbles?

**Alyssa:** Well, I remember looking through the *Grassroots Journal* and wanting to write something about **content research**—the learning practice about researching content, information-seeking behaviors, evaluating information, and citation practices. I felt like there was a gap there. Not many GWRJ articles addressed this learning practice explicitly and the ethics involved in research and citation practices, but I wasn’t totally sure how I wanted to go about discussing it in my article. I was in class with a few of my friends back in 2018, which feels like forever ago. I was talking with them about the article, and I told them why I wanted to focus on content research and ethical implications. They agreed with me that this was important work. So, we started brainstorming different ways to talk about content research in a *Grassroots* style. One of my friends, and also GWRJ author, Allison Hauser suggested the idea of examining filter bubbles as a way to discuss the ethics of research behaviors. So, Allison’s suggestion triggered a memory of watching Eli Pariser’s filter bubbles TED Talk back in my undergrad (see QR code in Figure 1), which was a perfect way to talk about how my research practices have

changed over the years. And that’s basically how this article came to be. It went through a lot of stages between research, writing, and revision, but this was the original premise.

**Edcel:** I really like how you wanted to write an article about content research. It’s one of the learning practices that, while we teach it a lot in our Writing Program, people have a hard time writing a specific article about it. When you think about the ethics behind research and all the process that goes into the research itself, especially thinking about more ethical ways to do research, I know that a lot of people might be intimidated



**Figure 1:** Scan this QR code to watch Eli Pariser’s TED Talk “Beware Online Filter Bubbles.”

by that or might be scared and think, “Whoa, what if I say something wrong and then people will backlash because of what I wrote or the ideas I had?” So, I think writing an article is a good way to be more transparent and talk about the importance of ethical research practices.

**Alyssa:** Yeah, for sure. I think content research is one of those learning practices we teach more implicitly, which isn’t inherently a bad thing. I mean, there are a lot of research habits we do automatically. But those automatic research habits can be an issue if we’re not thinking through what we’re researching and why we’re researching it in the different research stages—like when we’re initially looking up information or in the stages of citation creation. We can be perpetuating harmful ideas of what research is.

**Edcel:** Right. And that also gets me thinking about the writing process, which perfectly leads to my next question. What did the writing process of your article look like?

**Alyssa:** I started by doing a lot of content research. So, for me, this was rewatching the filter bubbles TED Talk and diving back into Eli Pariser’s work on algorithmic bias. Then, I did some research on filter bubbles in my own life to see what they really looked like. So that’s the part of the article where you see me comparing my Facebook page to my friend Dan Freeman’s Facebook page, and that part of the article actually came about unintentionally. I was sitting in Dan’s office talking with him about the article, just scrolling through my Facebook page and noticing some of the ads on my Facebook page, but I wasn’t sure what other people’s ads looked like. So, Dan was like, “Well, we could look at my page in comparison.” And so that research emerged just from a conversation with a friend. Once I had this content research between Eli Pariser’s work and analyzing some of the differences in Facebook ads between a male friend and my own as a female-presenting person, I then went back to the Grassroots Journal and considered the concepts I really wanted to emphasize. The four main ones I wanted to think through were writing researcher identity, antecedent knowledge, literate activity, and information-seeking behaviors, and how those all feed into each other. This is the point where I started outlining, thinking about in what order I wanted to introduce these concepts and where I could effectively present my research to support my main ideas. Outlining isn’t easy, but it goes pretty quickly for me once I’ve done all my content research. I’ve noticed that if I spend more time researching upfront, the writing process becomes a lot easier for me, and that was definitely the case in this article. So much research took place prior to drafting! I’m

definitely a slow writer, so it took me a week or two to get a complete draft together. But I think it would have taken me a lot longer if I hadn't had those conversations with friends and done the research in advance.

**Edcel:** That's really interesting. I like how you mentioned that the article idea and brainstorming process was because you were having conversations with friends. I think that's wonderful. When people hear the word research, they often think, "Oh, I have to read like 100 articles. I have to do all this extra groundwork." But really, it's just talking to peers. And not only peers who are your friends, but people who genuinely care about the things you care about and want to discuss them. That can change the process in so many ways. A lot of my best ideas come from conversations with my friends, too. And it's really helpful to have someone to share those ideas and the back-and-forth conversation with, which you don't easily get access to if you're just reading by yourself and spending all your time thinking by yourself.

“**Genre research** is the practice of investigating how we learn about and understand specific genres in use in the world, including the people, tools, and recurring situations that influence how texts get produced in a genre. When we do genre research, we participate in activity like finding our own examples in a genre and analyzing what people do—and how they do it—in those examples, so that we can create recognizable, effective texts in genres that are familiar and new-to-us in current and future writing situations” (“Genre Research Terms”).

“**Antecedent knowledge** refers to the facts, information, and skills that we each bring with us into familiar and new-to-us writing situations. When we talk about antecedent knowledge, we include our previous writing experiences with particular kinds of writing and prioritize articulating previous knowledge that we are often not required to describe or unpack explicitly” (“Uptake Terms”).

**Alyssa:** Yeah, for sure. I mean, I think we don't always consider the ways that knowledge is mediated and co-produced. And we're not just sitting in our own little bubbles—to draw back on the filter bubbles theme of my article. It's something that we have to navigate and negotiate with others. So, it definitely helps to talk things through and see what other people think or hear what ideas they have.

**Edcel:** Yeah, and these are sometimes the best ideas, too. It's cool to discover when thinking about genre research that it also comes from cocreating knowledge. And this brings me to my next question. What was your **genre research** when you were working on this article? What were some of the resources you used?

**Alyssa:** A lot of my genre research was based on my **antecedent knowledge** of the *Grassroots Journal*. At this point, I had read quite a few *Grassroots* articles and taught them

as well. So, I had a good understanding of what Grassroots articles tended to contain, like personal narratives that tied back to learning outcomes and key concepts (see QR code in Figure 2), research to back up substantial claims, and then smaller, easy-to-read sections that were simply fun bits of storytelling. So, I had a good idea of what a Grassroots article generally looks like and its conventions. My reading up to this point served as my primary form of genre research, which I briefly mentioned earlier, but I also went back through previously published Grassroots issues on the Writing Program website (see QR code in Figure 3) to see what learning outcomes tended to be addressed. This also served as genre research because it gave me a better sense of the journal and what it was missing. And that's where I came to the conclusion that I wanted to write an article on content research.

**Edcel:** Wow, thanks for sharing these details with us. I really like how you mentioned that once you had a better sense of the Grassroots Journal and its conventions, everything came together, or “weaved together” like a lot of folks like to say—the metaphor meaning the threads of thought woven together that create interconnectedness. It's really important as well because we don't just create Grassroots articles so people can read them. We also create them so people can practice writing them. Practice things like analyzing genres, how different writing genres work, and who your audience is. Also, what kind of topic would a person like to explore? And I find that works really well when reading journal articles. So, hopefully, people can get inspired and write their own articles.

**Alyssa:** Yeah, for sure. The learning outcomes are not just theoretical concepts. They're things we have to work on putting into practice—especially with content research. We can talk about ethical behaviors, and we can talk about ethical citation practices, but if we're not actually



**Figure 2:** Scan this QR code to check out the ISU Writing Program's “Terms in Categories” webpage.



**Figure 3:** Scan this QR code to check out the ISU Writing Program's GWRJ webpage “Publishing Writing Research.”

doing it ourselves, that totally defeats the purpose. There's definitely an in-practice component that may be even more important than the articles or concepts themselves.

**Edcel:** I agree with that for sure. So, once you finally had a draft you were happy with, how was the review process of your article?

**Alyssa:** The review process was really easy. I sent my article to the Grassroots editorial team, who emailed me back really quickly. They said my article was a good fit for the journal and then offered revision ideas. I think I went through two rounds of revision. One of their main ideas was adding a section on library resources. I hadn't originally planned for that to be in the article. However, it made sense to demystify Milner Library by showing how to use the online resources and how Milner's online resources differ from other platforms like Google and Google Scholar. So again, this goes back to the in-practice part. It wasn't just talking about content research. It was also about asking how we can practice ethical research using Milner Library sources. That became the end of my article, which added an action item for readers instead of just talking about content research and ethical information-seeking behaviors to conclude the piece. It added a "what do we do next" component. Overall, I think the review process was super helpful because it helped me polish my article in ways I hadn't considered initially.

**Edcel:** Thank you for walking us through all that. It sounds like the review process went smoothly, and the Grassroots editors gave you some solid advice. I definitely agree with your comment about demystifying the Milner Library and its resources. It's funny because just the other day, for a children's literature class, I talked to students about Milner's children's and YA collections on the sixth floor and encouraged them to explore these public spaces and access books. I also mentioned the Normal Public Library that's within walking distance from campus as well, and even talked about places like Walmart where you can just browse different books. Suppose you're waiting for an oil change, for example, which was my case last week. I browsed a bunch of different picture books and just used my time there. So, yeah, I definitely agree. Creating a consciousness of these resources that are accessible and available to us is really important, and it fits really well with content research.

**Alyssa:** For sure. There are so many awesome resources at Milner Library (see QR code in Figure 4) and the public library. And a lot

of times, people don't know they exist, or maybe they're too nervous to figure out how to navigate these places. That's something I talked about in my article, too. There are a lot of awesome online resources. This is helpful for people like me who have social anxiety and do not like going to places or figuring out new things when it requires human contact. A lot of article research can be done online. Browsing the Milner Library site brings up so much, including resources for writing. Definitely some cool stuff to look into!



**Figure 4:** Scan this QR code to check out the ISU Milner Library website.

**Edcel:** Fantastic. You heard it here, folks! So, thinking back to your article: If someone were to approach you, thinking they want to write a Grassroots article, what advice would you offer them, especially if someone doesn't know where to start or how to begin the research process?

**Alyssa:** I think for me, and it showed in my process, I recommend talking about your ideas with other people, brainstorming with friends, peers, mentors, whoever you like to talk through your ideas with—because **literate activity** is complicated and often way more collaborative than we realize. It doesn't have to be an isolated activity. I think we tend to picture ourselves writing alone in our rooms, like Googling random stuff when we don't know what it means. And coming up with ideas just off the top of our heads, like we're knowledge-making machines. And sometimes writing research might look like this. But other times, it looks like going to your friends when you're drawing a blank for ideas or don't know how to go about doing research. Or everyday office chats that turn into little research sessions. Or considering feedback from editors you hadn't thought about before. So, I think if you've got even a sliver of an

#### **Literate Activity**

In the ISU Writing Program, we talk about **literate activity** as “a way to describe the complex activity involved in people producing and using texts across spaces and times, in ways that are shaped by our histories, tools, social interactions, resources, bodies, emotions, and relationships with the world. When we talk about literate activity, we include reading, writing, listening, speaking, thinking, and feeling—all social practices that influence how we make meaning and communicate” (“Literate Activity Terms”).

idea or any kind of motivation to write something, see where it goes and be open to the chaos of all the conversations and different writing research moments.

**Edcel:** Awesome. Really great advice. Well, thank you so much, Alyssa, for sitting down to talk with us.

**Alyssa:** Thank you so much for asking me to do this interview.

The Grassroots team thanks Alyssa Herman for participating in this interview, and you can check out her article, “The Dangers of Filter Bubbles and Digital Isolation: Exploring Ethical Research Practices,” reprinted in this issue (14.2, Spring 2024) and in the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* issue 10.1.

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# Notes

