MISS TESMAN. Well, well! To think you can write about a thing like that!

(Ibsen, 1961: “Hedda Gabler,” Act I)

... ne jamais rencontrer une difficulté sans la prendre immédiatement comme sujet d’étude.

(Termier, 1908: p. 34; italics removed)

When we (the editors) conceived the idea for this volume, we hoped that a book of essays on the green ogre and his companions would attract some degree of public attention. Little did we know that an enterprising reporter from *The Sudbury Star*—a local newspaper in our hometown—would come across the call for papers that we had circulated in the usual academic venues, request an interview, and publish a front-page article on a book project that, at the time, was still in its embryonic stage. We likewise did not anticipate that the publication of this article would trigger a veritable media frenzy: for several weeks, not a day would go by without another request for an interview. All told, we fielded around a dozen interviews with local, regional, and national media.

This is obviously a rather generous application of the term “media frenzy,” and one that owes much to our professional background: as social scientists, we were accustomed to the relative anonymity of academic labor and ill-prepared for the limelight of media interest (regardless of its wattage). Social science research seldom makes the
news, and is deemed worthy of the front page even more rarely. While we were pleased with the public interest in our project, we could not help but be surprised. Why now, we wondered? Why, of all the projects our colleagues and ourselves had been working on, should this be the one to attract public interest? What made this project so much more “newsworthy” than our other research?

We were also surprised by the strength of feeling the book project seemed to elicit. For example, some of our colleagues were extremely supportive and seemed to consider the book project innovative and potentially insightful (or, failing that, at least original). Others clearly regarded a study on Shrek as an embarrassment to the profession. Similarly, while media coverage of the book project was generally positive, some of the public responses to that coverage were less than flattering. Naturally, we were more delighted with some of these responses than with others. More importantly, though, the question that increasingly puzzled us was this: Why should a book on the green ogre arouse this sort of emotional response? Especially in light of the fact that the book did not actually exist yet, that we had not received any submissions, and that we had barely begun looking for a publisher. We were, in short, at a loss to explain some of the reactions to the project.

That sense of bewilderment is what ultimately drives the present chapter. The latter is premised on the idea that analyzing the public response to our book project can shed some light on broader dynamics involved in the relationship between social science, the media, and the wider public. In particular, such an analysis can serve to illuminate some of the politics involved in knowledge creation and dissemination. It can do so in a particularly effective manner, not despite the fact that the public response to our project predated the actual book, but because of it. It is precisely because the editors could describe the project only in the most general terms that members of the public were able to use the book as a screen on which to project their own assumptions about social science, legitimate forms of knowledge, and the proper use of public resources.

The chapter will tease out some of these assumptions by examining a particular set of public responses to the book. Specifically, it will analyze online comments posted by Sudbury Star readers in response to the initial article on the Shrek project. This article was published simultaneously in print and on the Star’s website. Most of the Star’s online articles, including this one, allow members of the public to post comments. Opinions expressed in these comments typically tend to