The email denouncing me as an apologist for genocide came at a particularly bad moment. Saturday morning, so my guard was down. Shouldn’t I be watching cartoons with the kids and relaxing after a massive breakfast? Serves me right for checking work email on a weekend morning (although that is a different essay). The email arrived while I was still in the glow of what I felt was the greatest experience of my professional life, the opening of an exhibition that I had co-curated with my friend and colleague Tom Herron (English, East Carolina University) at the Folger Shakespeare Library (Nobility and Newcomers in Renaissance Ireland, which ran January through May 2013). The opening was a packed, gala event, presided over by the Irish ambassador and the director of the Folger, and attended by family, friends, colleagues, and hundreds of others. Tom and I gave opening addresses, welcomed guests, and reveled in an evening of excitement, support, hors d’oeuvres, and free booze. Seemingly, a fine time was had by all—certainly by my younger son Gavin, ten at the time, who ate his body weight in finger food—and compliments and kudos flowed as freely as the wine. And seemingly with the same effect, for on the following Saturday I was, as they say, fat and happy: relaxed, tired, and self-satisfied in the wake of what seemed a universally positive experience.
From such heady heights, the fall was fast and far. The message I received denouncing the exhibition as an offense to the tragedy suffered by the Irish people was copied to the Folger and to the Irish Embassy, and quickly made its way to the media. In short order, Tom and I found ourselves likened to Holocaust deniers in the Irish-American press—and that was only the worst of several unflattering comparisons. Having grown up in a large Irish-American family, and as an Irish historian and Gaelic speaker, I consider myself a part of that community, and the exhibition was, in part, intended to celebrate its past. To be painted an “apologist for genocide” by those I consider my own was devastating. As difficult as it was to read the articles themselves, reading the comments was worse. We all know that Internet comments can be an uncivil horror. Such knowledge hardly prepares you, however, for being the object of blogosphere wrath. After some initial forays in, I simply stopped reading the comments and hunkered down, ostriched away from comment threads, yet still nervous about what might start coming into my university email. The Folger, too, was bombarded with comments. Some were positive and seemingly made in ignorance of the controversy; others sought further information on early modern Ireland or asked follow-up questions related to the exhibition. However, many others were negative and prompted by the initial media attack, and the Folger’s Facebook page lit up in what seemed a pile-on of outrage.

I had eagerly pursued the chance to curate the exhibition, keen to bring my interests, research, and ideas to a public audience. No one had to convince me of the potential joys and upsides of public engagement; they seemed self-evident and immensely attractive in a world otherwise confined to speaking with specialist peers or very non-specialist undergraduates. The perils of public engagement, however, I learned on my own. And a harsh lesson it was. Given to depression, I shut down. One week feeling fat and happy was followed by two months of mental paralysis, and a lingering blackness that trailed long in its wake.

My experience with the perils of public engagement was primarily driven by the politics of Ireland and its diaspora but, nonetheless, it has implications for any who seek to work in a professional capacity beyond the academy. Such work is increasingly popular among academics, as they undertake blogging, outreach, community partnerships, experiential learning initiatives, and myriad other forms of public intellectual life. My particular tale offers a point of departure for thinking about the unintended consequences of efforts to present in a public forum research that addresses complex and sensitive issues.