

From public to civic intellectuals via online cultures

Peter Dahlgren

Lund University, Sweden

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Traditional public intellectuals

In the history of modern democracy, the role of the public intellectual (PI) has had an important place. While the image of the rugged individualist can at times occlude sociological insight into the phenomena of PIs, their capacity to independently address on matters of contemporary concern has played an important role in the dynamics of public opinion. While politically engaged, their commitments have been to the truth (as they see it from their various political perspectives); they for the most part have not sought power or political careers for themselves. At times they have expressed minority opinions that may then take hold and sway popular sentiment and/or decision-making by elites. At other times, they have had harsh responses from both power holders and the general public. The success rate of their causes has been less significant than the fact that they participated in vitalising democracy and animating the public sphere, even if, of course, success always adds to the heroic status. They have indeed been ‘intellectual’ people, driven by ideas and they have had a communicative capacity to reach and engage larger audiences. Yet the contemporary discussions about public intellectuals, has a certain quality of lament about them. There is a sense of loss, that things were somehow better in the past, somewhat akin to the notion of ‘community’, which is often typecast as another major victim of modernity. Certainly the character, role, numbers, and significance of PIs have evolved over the last century, and perhaps most notably in the last few decades. No doubt, the picture today in some ways looks troubling, as much of the key US and UK literature underscores (see, for example, Etzioni and Bowditch, 2006; Posner, 2003). On the other hand, the phenomenon can be seen from a variety of angles, and while not disputing the evidence for ‘decline’ and ‘loss’, I would like in this presentation to offer a somewhat different trajectory.

The traditional model of the PI is in some ways being edged out by institutional changes, both within and beyond the university that erodes the viability of economic and

ideological independence. At what point we should draw the line and say that a particular role or form of activity no longer qualifies as a PI, will always be open for discussion. There have long been grey zones, for example, between pundits, in the sense of journalistic commentators, and 'real' PIs. While many intellectuals view pundits as often being shallow and superficial, it is also true that many PIs have made use of journalistic formats to express their views in popular and accessible ways. On the other hand, the demarcation between PIs, public relation specialists, spin doctors, image managers and advertisers becomes less problematic, even if boundaries can never be fully fixed.

The book format has also been a key genre for PIs, and that the industry is certainly going through a turbulent period (see Thompson, 2010; Striphas, 2009, for recent analyses); this too impacts on PI opportunities to reach the public. The intensified economic pressures for short-term profits, leads to strategies aimed at launching bestsellers. This tends to reduce the likelihood of intellectual books aimed at smaller audiences being published (a discouraging development for PIs). However, technological changes also provide new options.

Pasquali (2011) argues that digitalisation is impacting on the infrastructure of publishing, the social practices of reading, as well as on the 'status' of the book, and not least the relationship between authors and readers. The enhanced possibilities for dialogue between authors and readers, and collaborative writing environments, promote new, participatory forms of online writing. The act of reading, as it evolves more and more into an electronic activity, becomes integrated into a broader array of cultural consumption spread over a variety of media platforms. The reader takes on a simultaneous status as a technology 'user', a 'consumer' and a member of a 'media audience'. In this makeover in the culture of books and print generally, the playing field for PIs becomes modified in ways that can still be promising for those who are willing and able to adapt to the new environment.

Public intellectuals and the digital media landscape

Now, let me just backtrack a bit and pull in a larger perspective. For citizens generally, the affordable and accessible Web 2.0 technologies can be utilised to communicate with each other individually or in groups/networks. Social media such as blogs, Facebook and Twitter have proven to be very useful for when people have felt politically motivated to engage in a debate, in order to mobilise and to organise for political purposes (see for example, Loader and Mercea, 2012). Within the online mainstream media, discussion forums for the expression of opinion have flourished.

The net has become a central institution of the public sphere; for those citizens who are in fact focused on news and discussion of politics, the possibilities are impressive, (despite the obvious limitations in regard to impacting on power and decision-making). Perhaps most fundamentally, in regards to the media, citizens are no longer just positioned as audiences, but can be active 'producers', as it is sometimes called. This can become empowering, both in subjective and objective terms, especially as citizens generate

networks, mini-public spheres, social movements, and engage in mobilisations.

These developments raise the fundamental issue of what the concept of PI means in the contemporary media landscape. To begin with, much remains the same. PIs are being amplified by the web. In the US, Danowski and Park (2009), in analysing the social network links of 662, 'traditional' PIs found that in fact they have higher visibility via Google and Google Groups, than in the traditional mass media. Moreover, the authors ascertained that the internet also supports discussion of dead PIs better than the mass media. Turning to online newspapers and major journalistic organisations like CNN, BBC, Al-Jazeera, The Huffington Post, we can note that they all have (mostly elite) bloggers, who function much like the commentators of the printed press, and in their ranks we find PIs.

The issue of deciding who is and is not a PI, even in this setting, remains ever with us; many are journalists and established 'pundits', but some are academics or experts in a special area. Such sites have become the home of digitally enhanced, updated versions of traditional, prominent PIs. Their texts are distributed by established media organisations, giving them both status and visibility.

Beyond these largely net-equivalents of traditional mass mediated PIs, we find other developments. For one thing, we can see today a new generation of PIs emerging, who differ from traditional PIs in two basic ways: namely their adept use of the new media affordances and their status as 'intellectuals'. Contemporary PIs whose intellectual formation has been strongly shaped by digital media, and thus have late modern 'web roots', and are therefore generally younger, engage in a variety of media practices. They use the affordances in more technically creative, multimedia ways, with audiovisual productions of various kinds, and even remixing materials from other mainstream or alternative sources. Ideas of course can be expressed in other ways beyond the classic linear text and its particular mode of cognitive activity.

People are discovering and inventing on the net new modes in which one can be intellectual. This is a historically exciting development, even if the challenge of maintaining standards and criteria of evaluation, of identifying the spurious, and so forth, becomes more difficult in the web context. We must also accept that there will be less of a consensus on these matters than in the past, given the strong strand of relativism in late modern culture. If 'truth' cannot be guaranteed from any one voice, we will have to hope that the collaborative, participatory, interactive, interventional environment of the internet will at least promote a sense of the openness and provisional.

Yet, most PIs today who operate online use the basic blog, which retains the classical form of a text. Generally speaking, even online, traditional PIs go through various filters of quality control in order to gain access to the public. This has been integral to their status and they have not been 'just anybody'. Today, however, just about anyone can in fact put materials out on the net. Thus, an important mechanism of the new media environment is precisely the ease of entry. Many are drawn to participate with political blogs, resulting in a larger, broader, and more diverse range of voices.

Towards civic intellectuals

While there is a layer of elite bloggers, many of whom have strong connections with political, economic and communication centres of power, beyond them there is thus a vast array of bloggers. Some citizens are obviously more intellectual, articulate and imaginative than others in their political communication. They tend to gain recognition for this within their circles and networks, in gaining audiences, and becoming opinion leaders of some kind. Among them are no doubt many whom we would classify as PIs, given their commitment to ideas, even allowing newer modes of multimedia and/or compressed textual expression. These are people with developed civic identities and who are engaged in political issues. While lacking the elite status of bloggers in the major media, they are nonetheless contributing to the expansion of the intellectual character of the public sphere. To distinguish them from traditional PIs, taking into account the contingencies of late modernity and its media landscape, I propose that we today call them 'civic intellectuals'.

This term seeks to signal the continued importance of intellectual activity for democracy, but involves a shift away from the more distinct and renowned figures we associate with PIs and the print-based public sphere. Instead, the concept of a civic intellectual emphasises the origins of politically motivated intellectual communication in the broad and diversified tapestry of politically engaged citizens. Civic intellectuals are generally less 'grand' than traditional PIs, though some may attain an equivalent stature. They are no less public than traditional PIs, though they are less likely to reach extensive audiences. Online public spheres are generally smaller and more fragmented (that was the case under the era of mass media). On the other hand, they are more likely to have more interaction with those who read their texts.

Civic intellectuals are thus a larger, more diffuse social category than traditional PIs and there are, by definition, more of them. They engage with politics under a set of contingencies shaped by the socio-cultural contours of late modernity, the dilemmas of democracy, the character of the media landscape, and not least, the contemporary crises of capitalism. In this sense, the notion of civic intellectuals is emblematic on how the dynamics of democracy are evolving in the face of very difficult historical circumstances. Thus, we should not see civic intellectuals as some new force that will lead democracy forward to a new golden age, but they do signal a potentially positive step in the chronicles of citizen participation and the evolution of the public sphere.

Email Address: peter.dahlgren@kom.lu.se.

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