Introduction

New Challenges to Knowledge in the Public Sphere

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The ability to imagine and to reason logically toward an outcome is an attribute that defines humanity and shapes human civilization. In every society, however, the social function and value of some individuals is defined primarily or exclusively in terms of thinking—of being able to perform intellectual work. The outcomes are learning and knowledge, but also the possibility for action. Almost by definition, once something new is known, the potential exists to do something new or to do it differently. Thus, human civilizations have generally accommodated the idea that the pursuit of knowledge is not an idle pursuit—that it has consequences, which, depending upon many circumstances, may be perceived in a positive or negative way by the power structures that govern these civilizations.

Perhaps because scholars, writers, scientists, and artists can be seen to perform a social function as intellectuals, they have often been characterized as a distinct community or even as a social class. Certainly throughout its history as a proper noun, “intellectual” has typically imbued its nominee not only with knowledge, insight, and expertise but also with social, political, and ethical responsibilities to intervene in issues of the day on behalf of the public good. There is, of course, no necessary connection between intellect
and virtue, especially public virtue. Nevertheless, for as long as there have been intellectuals, there is evidence that they have been involved in public life, sometimes from within the political system, as advisors, experts, or administrators, but also from without, as critics, activists, and advocates.

It is this external and nominally independent role that has long held the closest association with the figure of the “public intellectual,” whom, in various ways, the authors in this volume define or describe broadly as a person concerned with symbols and ideas who comments publicly on the social condition with the objective of influencing or guiding its future. In practice, however, it is actually very difficult to place public intellectuals within social role categories, partly because they typically place themselves in the position of attributing social roles to others. The sociological literature has mostly followed the notion proposed by Edward Shils (1970) of the public intellectual as having some contact with the transcendental. Public intellectuals were seen as burdened with a mission: to introduce society to a universal set of norms sanctioned by a higher authority, like the biblical prophet who speaks divine truth to earthly powers. This prototype lies at the core of works by Mannheim ([1936] 1968), Parsons (1970), and others who considered intellectuals to be located in a given society yet versed in a universal culture, nurturing it and feeding its values back to that society.

This somewhat romanticized notion finds its apogee in “speaking truth to power,” which has become a cliché for the social function of the public intellectual. However, this aphorism can be challenged in that it is hardly as if “truth” in this idealized form is any stranger to power. Intellectuals can also seek and obtain formal positions of power after the manner of a Disraeli, Wilson, Paderewski, or Havel. Others can decline such positions and, after the manner of Zola or Gandhi, become more powerful than the powers to which they speak. Indeed, one could argue that it is precisely by confusing power and truth in the public mind that totalitarianism can flourish—a process in which, historically, many intellectuals have also been complicit (Arendt 1978).

**Knowledge in Contemporary Political Discourse**

Power also speaks to truth to the extent that truth is associated with knowledge as established through investigation, experimentation, evaluation, and documentation. The production and dissemination of knowledge is
subject to powerful internal forces of governance and oversight. This fact tends more easily to be perceived negatively in terms of abuses like suppression or censorship. But much the same set of forces also serve the positive function of establishing standards of practice by which knowledge is pursued systematically and new contributions to knowledge are assessed and classified. What historically have been accepted as “truths,” in the sense of distinguishing knowledge from opinion or fact from fiction, are themselves products of complex negotiations, often over long periods of time, between progressive and repressive forces that coexist within the inherently disputatious governance structures of knowledge production (Ziman 1978; Gibbons 1999; Latour and Woolgar 1979; Mulkay 1991).

This is particularly noteworthy when we construe a public voice for academics, whose work, unlike that of journalists, novelists, or advocates, is largely conducted and debated well out of the public gaze but whose intellectual credibility has a long historical association with independent evaluation and validation through peer review. Polanyi (1962) proposed that the internal dynamics of the scientific enterprise constitute a “republic,” subject to its own enforced norms of behaviour, whose primary responsibilities are confined mainly to the practice of systematic inquiry, as opposed to the utility or social relevance of its outcomes. However, to the extent that such a republic exists, it is an easy target for subversion. For example, Canadian scientists employed by government laboratories are now faced with a dictate from the government in power that prohibits them from disclosing and discussing their scientific findings in media interviews even though they are allowed to present these findings to other scientists at academic conferences that are nominally public. In other words, talking to other scientists is allowed because the public generally does not participate in this discourse anyway. Talking directly to the public at large is not allowed. Thus, the internal dynamics of the scientific community are manipulated for purposes of political message management while avoiding charges of outright censorship.

Powerful internal and external forces shape the process by which knowledge is defined and produced, and not always to the good. The issues are compounded as regards the utilization of knowledge, which can depend on how closely that knowledge conforms to dominant political narratives (Connolly 1983; MacRae 1976; Majone 1989). These narratives are now most strongly inflected by economic imperatives. Already by the 1960s,
Heilbroner (1962) could detect this inflection in the terms of political discourse, in that the perception of the nation-state had evolved from that of a “community” or “society,” implying a need to govern, to that of an “economy,” implying a need to manage. In such a regime, knowledge becomes valued not as a pathway to social or civic enlightenment but according to its demonstrated ability to add to the national bottom line.

More than at any previous time, the social value of knowledge is becoming harnessed to the ideological construct of “market forces.” Over the past thirty or so years, for example, it has become the norm for governments who fund academic research to justify this expenditure by stressing its economic utility (Mowery et al. 2004). The exact nature of this utility is usually crudely or dubiously defined, as the aim is more to bring science into line with dominant liberal or neoliberal social values than to realize any economic value from science. The result is that universities are pressured to demonstrate specific and often short-term economic returns on public investments in education and research and to participate directly in turning knowledge into money (Feller 1990). In the face of such pressures, the public space of intellectual life can appear less the domain of appeals to transcendent notions of ethics, morality, and justice and more that of hard-nosed economics, which its proponents would assume to embody social virtues (Keren 1993).

**Substantiating the Intellectual Foundations of Public Speech**

Apart from the problem of defining a social role or category for the public intellectual, attributing this role to individuals is also problematic. As with Kenneth Clarke’s iconic description of civilization as something you can define only when you see it, it may seem that these figures are much easier to identify than to typify. The situation is further complicated by the fact that not everyone who is engaged in intellectual pursuits seeks or accepts opportunities to become a public figure. Thus, it can be difficult to discuss public intellectuals as a social and political institution apart from specific personalities whose points of view happen to achieve public prominence.

It is even more difficult to link what an individual might say in the putative role of public intellectual with any actual substance, other than position and reputation—in other words, to link public pronouncements with the fruits of systematic thought and investigation, whether in the form of
facts and evidence or genuine insight. The question of evidence is important because, arguably, a unique quality of intellectually inspired contributions to public life, as opposed to the mere adoption and promotion of an opinion, is a sense that the contribution is rooted not just in awareness, which to a superficial extent anyone can acquire quite easily, but also in an epistemology. This assumption of epistemological rigour links contributions to debates of the day with an understanding of what knowledge is with respect to a particular subject, how to recognize it, how to differentiate it from ignorance, and how to define its relevance in different contexts.

It is precisely this issue of substantiation that forms the primary focus of this volume and that distinguishes its arguments and conclusions from most of the literature on this subject. Previous explorations of public intellectuals tend to be biographical, focusing on specific individuals who have assumed this role, or sociological, focusing on public intellectuals collectively as a social institution, or political, focusing on interest groups and movements associated with particular intellectual positions or ideologies. Our focus in this volume is squarely upon the question of intellectual substance. We are concerned to investigate the evolution of intellectual substance per se in the interaction between public life, as embodied in the issues and debates of the day, and intellectual life, as embodied in the production and dissemination of knowledge. In particular, our concerns lie with how the question of substantiation is faring in a public sphere increasingly dominated by an ever-expanding array of electronic media that are increasingly bereft of indications as to the source, credibility, or epistemological framework of the content they carry.

In the sense explored here, the public sphere refers generally to the milieu in which the institutions and practices of social and political governance interact with the general population engaged in everyday life. In the broad tradition of the Frankfurt School, extending from Horkheimer and Marcuse in the 1930s and 1940s to Habermas in the present day, critical theorists have explored various versions of the theme that the public sphere has become defined by communication media. The purveyors of media are seen to acquire great political power, both as gatekeepers and as shapers of the public consciousness. In this regime, who speaks is determined by who grants access to the media, with the content and nature of the speech itself being forged by this power relationship.
Certainly public intellectuals require access to the public via a communication platform of some description, whether it be the speaker’s stump, the book, the editorial column, or, increasingly, the sound bite, the blog, or the Tweet. Historically, the access of individuals to communication media has been restricted, whether by political power, by commercial considerations, or simply by production and distribution costs. The basic political economy of what conventionally has been referred to as mass media—books, periodicals, and broadcast media—spawned a copious literature on elites that has strongly inflected most views of the public intellectual as a social institution. In this environment, achieving the social status of public intellectual might seem like the product of a Faustian bargain between the purveyor of ideas and the purveyors of media. Inevitably, the influence of the media also raises questions about the credibility, or reliability, of intellectuals in the public eye and about how the role of the public intellectual is constructed, particularly in relation to concerns regarding the criteria by which the interests that own and control these media select individuals for public exposure in this role.

Departing from this tradition, the present collection of essays ponders the future of intellectuals in a technology-mediated public sphere that is no longer characterized by scarcity but instead by abundance. Ours is an era defined by an expanding diversity of open and interactive communication media to which a majority of the world’s population now has access. Apparently in stark contrast to the rise of the traditional mass media, which first fascinated critical theorists in the 1930s, never before has the potential been greater for more individuals to communicate more directly with others in a greater variety of ways and, superficially at least, with fewer, and lower, entry barriers and less restriction and oversight.

This change has spawned multitudes of claims and counterclaims to the effect that democratic processes and the conduct of public affairs are being transformed in this new milieu. The authors represented here take issue with these claims. From a variety of perspectives and in several different contexts, they question assumptions that have crept, whether intentionally or surreptitiously, into recent discussions of media and politics to the effect that truth is a simple function of the amount of speech. This quantitative approach to truth implies that, as technology enables the number of speakers to grow, power relationships will accordingly be transformed, such that democratic principles and goals are promoted and nurtured. This tendency is a particularly insidious new form of technological determinism, in which
social and political dynamics are confused with technological characteristics. Because access to the Internet appears to be “open,” the tendency is to argue either that this openness is a product of democratic social forces—a dubious historical assumption—or, worse, that public affairs as conducted in this sphere will adopt similarly open characteristics—a dubious technological as well as political assumption.

In terms of our central concern with substantiation—with what underpins the credibility of those who appear in nominally public intellectual roles, as well as the validity of their statements and the quality of their insights—this new abundance of access to the public sphere raises many intriguing issues. One is that entirely obscure or even anonymous individuals and groups can now have access to the means of communicating with a mass audience on much the same basis as identifiable individuals and established institutions. Another is that the kind of wisdom and sagacity once attributed only to identifiable individuals and institutions is now commonly attributed to crowds or conferred upon disembodied bloggers.

While the authors in this volume do comment upon the social role of the public intellectual, their main concern is with fundamental questions about the basic concepts of truth, knowledge, and power in the contemporary public sphere. Technology is not regarded merely as an enabler of communication but as yet another embodiment of powers that seek to shape and mobilize public opinion to various ends. Much as intellectual life is no guarantor of virtue, neither is access to the public sphere through new technology a guarantor of independence or objectivity, much less veracity. Thus, the authors are concerned less with what public intellectuals are or what they say than with what underpins the credibility of interveners in the public sphere who seek to influence issues of the day with appeals to symbols and ideas.

Such concerns are overtly political and not contingent upon any particular interpretation or resolution of broader philosophical debates about the definition of knowledge or the objectivity of science, questions that have entertained the human mind for millennia and, barring catastrophe, are likely to persist for millennia more. Unavoidably, the reflections presented in this volume must engage with various aspects of sometimes long-standing debates about both public intellectuals and evolving media. However, the aim is to go beyond these debates and to explore their implications for the future in terms of how the fruits of intellectual work will be incorporated
into the public sphere in a world where access to the agora of ideas is putatively unrestricted. Will the intellectual as a community or class be redefined? Will intellectual activity thrive or lose relevance? Will it matter? Or how will it matter?

**Synopsis**

The following chapters represent a wide range of perspectives on the issues raised above and take several approaches to exploring different aspects of the role, function, and future of the intellectual in the public sphere. These essays are divided into two parts. The first part applies perspectives ranging from the empirical to the philosophical to general questions and issues pertaining to the nature of knowledge, the dynamics of knowledge production, and the place of intellectuals in public life. The second part focuses in on some of the real-life challenges that confront public intellectuals who operate in the new technological milieu. These case histories have a pronounced existential dimension. Three of them are rooted in the concrete experience of their authors, who have embraced and/or been thrust into public intellectual roles. These chapters illuminate how this crucial issue of substantiation plays out in contemporary practice in today’s media environment and demonstrate the many pitfalls that may await intellectuals in the evolving public sphere when they challenge the substance of prevailing views and popular opinions.

In opening part 1, Richard Hawkins goes to the heart of the knowledge production process by exploring the often uneasy historical relationship between science and scientists and the public sphere, and, more generally, the challenges that arise when knowledge producers in universities assume the role of public intellectuals. He argues that, in a political sense, this relationship goes far beyond the public communication of science or the public debate over scientific issues. As he observes, the fruits of academic investigation must now compete in a new information “ether” in which many of the traditional knowledge hierarchies have become confused. This makes it more difficult to substantiate not only the legitimacy of statements and opinions that claim a basis in science but in fact the very relevance of claims to scientific validation. Hawkins discusses how this situation can weaken the status of science and scientists in the public sphere and also how the internal dynamics of science as a profession and a career can sometimes
subvert attempts to shape social outcomes with appeals to evidence and rigorous analysis.

In chapter 2, Eleanor Townsley argues that, despite the encroachment of new media, long-standing, and traditionally elite, formats for the expression of ideas continue to exert significant force in the shaping of public opinion. Through an empirical comparison of the opinion columns in the New York Times and the Globe and Mail, Townsley explores the ways that cultural forces (including the media industry itself) work to influence who has the opportunity to speak in the “space of opinion,” as well as defining the terms of the debate—observing, for example, that the debate among the purveyors of opinion in the United States reflects partisan polarization to a greater extent than in Canada. While acknowledging that digital formats have contributed to a certain fragmentation of opinion, Townsley suggests that the impact of new media lies more with their ability to multiply the former powers of syndication. Not only do digital formats enable the views of an opinion columnist to reach far beyond the readers of printed newspapers, but the increasing interconnectedness of the landscape of opinion allows for more rapid dissemination and commentary. As Townsley points out, insofar as this broader landscape conditions the shape of opinionated speech, we would do well to focus attention on the implications of the transformation of public intellectuals into media intellectuals.

In chapter 3, Jacob Foster carries the discussion into the new media environment, which is putatively oriented away from an elite media class. Specifically, he casts a critical eye upon the prospect that “epistemic collectivism,” or the construction of a collective intelligence from many individual contributions, might, in an age of interactive electronic media, supplant the single, autonomous intellect, thus undermining any future place for individuals in traditional public intellectual roles. He proposes that such a construction fundamentally misunderstands the nature of intelligence, collective or otherwise, and suggests that it is unsubstantiated faith in the inherent superiority of collective intelligence that presents potentially the most significant problem for political discourse. For Foster, the role of public intellectuals in a world of social media is to constitute a “representative meritocracy” capable of mediating between different degrees of collective intelligence on the basis of the recognition of expertise. Far from undermining democracy, he argues, the creation of a “digital republic empowered by
devotion to individual creativity and the critical sense” would rescue collective epistemologies from descending into the mentality of the mob.

Chapter 4 turns to a very different dimension of collectivism, one in which public activism is undertaken anonymously by online communities. Drawing on Kierkegaard’s “The Present Age,” with its image of a passive “phantom public,” and on the work of Internet theorists such as Clay Shirky, Charles Leadbeater, and Geert Lovink, Liz Pirnie explores the topical phenomenon of “hacktivism” and probes the potential of organized online communities to engage the public in political debate. In place of autonomous public intellectuals, who are increasingly swayed by motives of self-promotion, she suggests that we need to look to decentralized networks of individuals who work collectively to translate social critique into real-world expressions of dissent. Through her investigation of the online community Anonymous and its efforts to expose social wrongs, she proposes that this form of action may emerge to fill a vacuum caused by the detachment of conventional political and social institutions from the publics they are intended to serve.

In chapter 5, Boaz Miller sets the stage for part 2 of the volume by situating the discussion of the epistemological role of public intellectuals—their function in setting out knowledge frameworks for the pursuit of social and political outcomes—within the context of calls for action on the part of specific public intellectuals on an issue of growing concern, namely, anthropogenic climate change. Focusing on the arguments advanced by two very high-profile Canadian public intellectuals, one with a scientific background, the other a novelist and social critic, he examines how the two construct very different epistemologies concerning exactly the same issue. In so doing, Miller also reengages the question of scientific evidence and the challenges of deploying it in an effort to sway public opinion. As he demonstrates, both David Suzuki and Margaret Atwood base their pleas for action on the claim that global warming is an incontrovertible scientific fact, and yet neither of the social epistemic frameworks they employ is entirely capable of supporting this claim.

Chapter 6 steps directly into the lived experience of public intellectuals. In 2003, Karim-Aly Kassam was named one of Alberta’s fifty most influential people. His contributions to public life draw in part upon his applied research in human ecology conducted in the circumpolar Arctic and the mountains of Central Asia, two regions that furnish illustrations used in his
chapter. By inverting the “speaking truth to power” aphorism, the title of this volume draws attention to the ways in which truth can be usurped by the powerful, not always in the public interest. Kassam nevertheless makes a compelling case that this need not be so—that it is not impossible for truth to usurp power. But he is also very clear about the personal preparation and humility, as well as the institutional integrity, that are required before the public intellectual can muster truth to these ends. Kassam accordingly emphasizes the manner in which individuals become prepared, especially through academic training, to assume roles as public intellectuals. University professors should, he argues, serve as exemplars for students by making a habit of public scholarship—an activity that arises out of a sense of civic responsibility and is in fact fundamental to intellectual life in a democracy. Moreover, rather than continuing to view teaching as separate from research, we must integrate applied research into pedagogical practices so as to encourage students to pursue new insights founded on the direct experience of life and on a commitment to bettering the human condition in ways that recognize and respect the environments and the web of relationships on which people depend for their survival.

In chapter 7, Barry Cooper reflects on his own encounter with public notoriety as a university professor cast into the role of public intellectual. He begins by reflecting on the modern figure of the public intellectual in the light of classical Greek conceptions of the role of the poet-philosopher in political life, as someone who opposed the rule of tyranny through reasoned philosophical critique. Cooper argues that this role gave way, in the twentieth century, to what he calls “the philotyranny of the intellectuals,” who, while short on philosophical insights, are long on obscurantist jargon and ideological fealty. He goes on to put flesh on the bone by illustrating, from his own experience, the issues that come into play for academic governance when academic freedom is exercised to take positions that are polarizing or otherwise unpopular among substantial portions of the population. Somewhat ruefully, Cooper concludes that, aside from common sense and the ability to write reasonably clearly, public intellectuals in Canada today must be equipped with a keen sense of irony.

In chapter 8, Michael Keren concludes the discussion by exploring a similar experience, one pertaining not to the academic milieu but to new media and new forms of political discussion. The issue revolves around how those who offer commentary in the digital public sphere react to criticism
of themselves. In this case, the criticism took the form of comments made by the author about the degree of influence that unsubstantiated opinion, of the sort that appears frequently on blogs, will have on political discussion—comments that, from the standpoint of bloggers, represented a dissenting position. Surveying the online response to these comments, Keren argues that public discourse in the new media cannot be compared to the Greek agora, as some scholars suggest, without considering warnings, such as those issued in 1930 by José Ortega y Gasset in *The Revolt of the Masses*, on the dangers of political discourse that lacks inner inhibitions or constitutional constraints. Online discourse engages more individuals in the public conversation than ever before and also broadens that conversation to include private concerns hitherto excluded from the public sphere. All too often, however, the disinhibition associated with online behaviour produces anything but the civil, reasoned discourse demanded of intellectual activity.

Taken together, the authors in this volume show that the most significant issues for the future of the public intellectual as a social institution go well beyond the technological or social evolution of communication media. Intellectuals face many new challenges, generated by a multitude of factors—by public attitudes toward learning and knowledge, by practical needs that require knowledge to be applied to solving problems, and, increasingly, by often new and different commercial imperatives. There are also challenges from within as many of the criteria that have historically defined the objectivity and credibility of intellectuals, in particular concerning science, come under scrutiny, and even attack, from intellectuals themselves.

In reality, power also speaks to truth, sometimes elevating it, often suppressing it. In today’s media, opportunities have never been greater for the exploitation of ideas and symbols in countless causes and by increasingly faceless interests seemingly devoid of Ortega y Gasset’s inhibitions and constraints. Nevertheless, in the face of these observations, it is by no means clear that any fundamental balance between power and truth in the new media environment is shifting. What is spoken continues to be powerful to the extent that it conforms to prevailing political narratives, which continue to be embodied in media of information and communication. That these media are evolving is beyond question, but this likewise has always been so.

As the essays in this volume suggest, while media may evolve, power still speaks to truth much in the same ways as ever. The substantiation
of knowledge claims, as embodied in ideas and symbols, is not increased merely by disseminating them, or by sharing them, or by broadening the definitions of knowledge, but in some way by transcending the media of communication, as indeed has always been the lot of the public intellectual.

References


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