

The public intellectual: Bridging the activist/academic divide
Workshop presentation

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“Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife.”
~ John Dewey

The public intellectual has a difficult task in negotiating the historically stark, often prickly divide between the culture of advocacy groups and that of academe. Advocacy groups typically have a singular focus and mission, which can encourage isolation - from other advocacy groups, from social institutions (government agencies, universities) and even the public. This can generate a radical perception of the group, fanned by the corporate mainstream media, further alienating it from public sympathies. Scholars regard such groups warily. The organizational culture of advocacy groups arises from a small core of dedicated volunteers or underpaid workers and is characterized by chronic lack of funding and persistent lack of time.

The culture of academy, on the other hand, is rooted in the myth of objective researcher, an ivory tower complex and an hierarchical structure that replicates status quo (e.g. patriarchy; class system). Its corporate infrastructure undermines attempts to embrace or effect meaningful change. Run like a business rather than an institution in service of the public, the university is emasculated in its civic role. Its organizational culture rewards individualism through the convention of “publish or perish.” Academics are encouraged to innovate new ideas but this demand for novelty frequently devolves into derivative and superficial work. Researchers outside of the sciences typically eschew collaborative work and co-authoring, opting instead for that “eureka!” moment when then can claim a theory or coin a term of their own.

This type of work environment fosters competition rather than cooperation, individualism rather than community, professionalism rather than activism. The copyright regime reinforces these effects: journals often impose strict copyright regimes upon their authors. Further, academic journals are largely inaccessible to the public, closing the knowledge loop and keeping it within the rarefied confines of the academy. The internet has proven one tool to redress this situation: open journal and open access systems suggest an acknowledgement of the problem as well as a hopeful solution to bridging academic and non-academic worlds. Software such as wikis offer an alternative model for knowledge production that is open and collaborative.

The role of the intellectual in progressive social change has been theorized by radical thinkers like Marx, Gramsci (1992) and Foucault (1980); it remains an urgent question. If we affirm the intellectual’s role in the production of knowledge for the benefit of the broader society, as well as in the nurturing, enlivening and maintenance of democracy, we assume the public intellectual, or the academic *as* activist. This activism unfolds in several ways:

1. Through a critical/radical pedagogy. We must orient our curricula toward creating and nurturing engaged, informed citizens able to understand, navigate and participate in the public sphere, not just “teaching the material”;
2. Through a commitment to norms-based research. Communication scholars must conduct research on subject matters that matter, where outcomes have social value and use. This requires dispensing of the myth of the objective researcher; research should not be commoditized, nor commandeered by the state; neither should it

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- present as “neutral”, for nothing touched by human hand, heart or brain lacks subjectivity;
3. Through engagement in civic life beyond the hallowed halls of academe. This includes press interviews, public talks, attendance at civic and cultural events, including student productions, as well as participation in political culture. Scholars on the cusp of social movements, such as Foucault, Marcuse and Chomsky come to mind. And of course, leaders such as McChesney are invaluable for helping inaugurate movements.

References:

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Kate Milberry is a social justice activist and doctoral candidate in the School of Communication. Her research examines the democratization of technology as a tool and technique for progressive social change. Her current work focuses on the relationship between social movements and the Internet, in particular, how tech activists' use and develop free software to achieve broader goals of democracy, social and economic justice, equality and environmental sustainability. The imbrication of knowledge with power in the creation and maintenance of social inequities has sparked Kate's latest work, a critique of monopolies of knowledge in the academy and a consideration of open source as a method for contesting copyright and deprivatizing academic knowledge. Her recent published work on the dialectical relationship between knowledge production in wikis and progressive civilizational change includes: *Reconstructing the Internet: How Social Justice Activists Contest Technical Design in Cyberspace* <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0603/10-milberry.php> and *The Wiki Way: Prefiguring Change, Practicing Democracy* http://www.tailoringbiotechnologies.com/volume_3.html#Issue%201.

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