

Digital Scholarship, Higher Education and the Future of the Public Intellectual

Mark Murphy, University of Glasgow &

Cristina Costa, University of West of England

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Highlights

- The concept of the public intellectual needs reframing.
- This requires a recasting of academic scholarship in the digital era; The digital public sphere requires a well-evidenced set of interventions from the academy.
- The ideals of digital scholarship are tempered by the realities and politics of academia.
- public pedagogy needs to be directly aligned to the digital public sphere as a space of intellectual engagement

Keywords:

Digital Scholarship, Public intellectuals, Digital Public Sphere, Higher Education

Abstract

Intellectual life in countries such as the UK and elsewhere is currently framed by a seeming contradiction. On the one hand, notions of engagement and knowledge transfer have taken centre stage in higher education institutions in their desire to create impact with the general

public and non-academic institutions. But on the other hand, these societies are witnessing an apparent decline in the role and importance of the public intellectual. Given this is the case, it is important to ask: what does the future hold for the public intellectual? And what is the role of the university when it comes to sustaining and enriching a broader intellectual culture in the public sphere? The aim of this paper is to explore these questions, particularly in the context of the spread of digital scholarship in the academy. This form of web-based academic scholarship, which valorises openness and public engagement, has the potential to change the shape and substance of public intellectualism. The paper explores this potential in detail, while at the same time outlining some of the challenges faced by the digital scholarship movement and its efforts to further ‘publicise’ intellectual life.

Introduction

Since its heyday, the role of the public intellectual as traditionally understood has waned considerably, with less visibility accorded figures who assume this mantle in contemporary world affairs. This may be down to the fact that the modern notion of the intellectual embodies a set of social contradictions, contradictions that become magnified in a world of open access, social media and accelerated knowledge production. It may also have something to do with a decline in public sentiment for the sage on the stage figure, part of a broader decline in the legitimacy of academic knowledge more generally.

Another source of contradiction can be found in the fact that, in tandem with this general decline in public intellectualism, many universities have adopted an explicit concern with achieving societal impact via its intellectual activities. These universities are increasingly involved in knowledge exchange activities as a strategic response to calls for greater public

accountability (Watermeyer, 2016), and also as a method of ensuring the institution's financial sustainability. In the UK this desire to deliver on the impact agenda and to work with 'non-academic beneficiaries' is spurred on by an explicit focus on impact as part of the revised agenda for the Research Excellence Framework (REF), alongside the impact requirements as laid out by the Research Councils – the bodies that award grants to UK researchers.

Given this current situation in which notions of engagement and knowledge transfer have taken centre stage in the search for impact, it is important to ask: what does the future hold for the public intellectual? And what is the role of the university when it comes to sustaining and enriching a broader intellectual culture in the public sphere? These questions are important to consider, because education itself is 'so often dedicated to the formation of future persons' (Amsler and Facer, 2017, p. 7), with education institutions heavily involved in the work of anticipation and future planning.

The aim of this paper is to explore these questions, particularly in the context of the spread of digital scholarship in the academy. This form of web-based academic scholarship, which valorises openness and public engagement, has the potential to change the shape and substance of public intellectualism. The paper explores this potential in detail, while at the same time outlining some of the challenges faced by the digital scholarship movement and its efforts to further 'publicise' intellectual life. The paper is organised around 5 sections, each making a contribution to the core argument about the future of public intellectualism. Section one outlines the definitions normally associated with the notion of the public intellectual, focusing on the traditional concept of the isolated but politically-engaged individual. This is used as a stepping off point for section two, which provides a summary of recent attempts to

reframe the public intellectual around notions of ‘public character’ and ‘temperament’. This is followed by sections 3-5 which form the core part of the paper, and offer a reconstructed notion of the public intellectual from the perspective of the digital. Section 3 reshapes the meaning of the public sphere, firmly embedding Habermas’ original description of the democratic debating chamber in the context of digital technology and digital communication. Section 4 recasts the field of academic scholarship in the digital era, making explicit connection between the digital public sphere and the future of academic scholarly activity. Section 5 adds to these reconstructions by identifying some of the key challenges that must be acknowledged in the relationship between higher education and the future of public intellectual life. The paper concludes by making a case for a form of public pedagogy, a pedagogy that represents a more sustained and proactive engagement on the part of academics and institutions with the digital public sphere.

1. What is the public intellectual?

The public intellectual has traditionally been represented in the shape of singular, charismatic individuals who embody authority and legitimacy in their analysis of social pathologies (Posner, 2003). The key detail here relates to their highly individualised nature – although they may speak to a broader shared consensus among specific pockets of activists and scholars, much of their power derives from the distinction and reputation they embody and project to the world. These have often been men such as Bertrand Russell, Jean-Paul Sartre and Edward Said, but there have been women also such as Susan Sontag, Germaine Greer and more recently Martha Nussbaum who have assumed the mantle of public intellectualism, using their considerable prestige and academic expertise to engage a broader public across a wide range of social issues (Fleck *et al*, 2008). It should also not be surprising that those at

the forefront of social theory, such as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Jürgen Habermas and Pierre Bourdieu have been only too willing to take on this mantle, with for example Habermas publicly bemoaning the response of the European Union state to the migration crisis of 2016.

While these more recent advocates of public intellectual engagement still carry the flag, they represent an apparently dying breed of academic. Numerous commentators have lamented the decline in the status and visibility of the public intellectual (Etzioni and Bodwitch, 2006, Jacoby, 2000, Morris, 2010; Posner, 2003). The modern university has sometimes borne the brunt of the criticism – its desire to professionalise and micro-manage the professoriate viewed as a nail in the coffin of the traditional wide-ranging intellectual unafraid to speak truth to power. This has been the thrust of critiques put forth by scholars who see institutional governance aligned with a cultural anti-intellectualism as the source of the malaise. The modern use of metrics and measurements has created a set of academics less interested in public engagement and more concerned with their CVs. The increased level of accountability and regulation of academic work has put paid to the desire to take political and critical stances on the issues of the day, and has blunted the strength of intellectual ideas to penetrate the mainstream (Jacoby, 2000). Edward Said, a prominent intellectual in his own right, expressed similar sentiments in his Reith Lectures from 1993 (Said, 1996), arguing that the limits placed on academic autonomy would leave intellectuals exposed in vulnerable positions. His solution to this was to urge intellectuals to carve out spheres of independence and autonomy from such forms of regulation and surveillance.

This has proved difficult in the current epoch, with conflicting demands for impact, relevance and public engagement sitting side by side the need to enhance an institution's scholarly

reputation and prestige. These demands do not always coalesce, and offer a variation on Bourdieu's distinction between academic and symbolic capital. While Bourdieu (1988) used this distinction to denote the institutional career ethos (academic capital) and the wider reputation and influence (symbolic capital), the modern variant offers more of a contradiction: while universities want their staff to engage with the public and create impact, they also pressure academics to publish in high impact journals, most of which are inaccessible to members of the public and often need to be written to appeal directly to fellow niche specialists.

This rhetoric around loss and decline can also be considered overstated, especially when the university is considered part of the equation – how many academics in the supposedly golden age were attracted to public intellectual work? The presence of Chomsky, Sartre, Marcuse and Davis should not blind us to the fact that the isolated academic was a much more common figure on campus. Caution should be exercised around notions of loss, decline and retreat from a golden age and avoid politics of nostalgia so prominent in modern conceptions of the university more generally (Murphy, 2011). It is also worth noting that the role of academic and public intellectual are not one and the same thing – they may at times overlap, but much academic work can be considered by necessity to be private intellectual work. Conversely a great deal of public intellectual activity may not be traditionally 'academic' in nature.

The influence of the university has hindered the public intellectual in other ways - one of these being the transformation in higher education numbers in the second half of the 20th century. It may be the case, thanks to the expansion of the professoriate resulting from the massification of HE since the 1960s, that the space for intellectual work has in fact widened,

not narrowed (Goodman, 2009, p. 32). This notion disputes the idea that the public intellectual as a visible force is in decline; instead of the isolated but authoritative figure of the public intellectual, one can now witness in its place a proliferation of intellectuals across numerous fields. There is a ‘new class of academics, many of whom loathe the very notion of isolation in an ivory tower’ (Goodman, 2009, p. 32). These modern academics take as given notions of outreach, exchange, connection and publicness, and see little value in strict divisions between academic and political work. This development has potentially ushered in an era in which the residual elements of the traditional public intellectual has been replaced by a more pluralistic and diverse conception of the relation between academic work and public spaces.

At the same time, while most countries still have the privilege of housing intellectual work, there are unfortunate cases that can support the decline thesis, but in drastically different ways than put forward by supporters of the ‘decline’ thesis. One such case is the situation in Turkey since 2016, in which public intellectuals are considered undesirable, the authoritarian government engaging in the ‘penalisation of academicians in the most ruthless and unjust way’ (Göle, 2017, p. 880). Göle points to the importance of the public sphere as a bulwark against this penalisation and as a space for intellectuals to present their ideas to a receptive audience.

2. A reframing of the public intellectual

Some authors have attempted to recently recast the concept of the public intellectual away from the traditional conception. Fatsis (2016) is one author who casts doubt on the value of the isolated academic, arguing that too much emphasis has been placed on the intellectual

arena as opposed to the public sphere. This emphasis has allowed a restricted view of intellectual life to maintain its grip on the ‘notion of the public intellectual as an omniscient sage who dispenses the wisdom of the ages to a helpless and hapless public (Fatsis, 2016, p. 13). Instead we need a broader definition of public intellectual, one that takes Jane Jacobs’ (1961) concept of the ‘public character’ and situates it in the modern globalised world. This according to Fatsis necessitates a transformation of the way we think about intellectual life, one as a more ‘ordinary collective pursuit’ as opposed to an elitist property of a chosen ordained few.

This shift from the individual to the social, from the private to the public, is welcome and a necessary component of any revised concept of public intellectualism in a digital world. It seems an obvious position to adopt that public intellectual work should be a public endeavour, one that as Fatsis suggest, exists ‘firmly in the public sphere’. At the same time, aside from a call for the affective domain to be taken more seriously and the inclusion of a larger pot of ‘characters’, it offers little in terms of strategy never mind the role of the university in intellectual life. If the goal is a more everyday ‘common’ intellectualism, this at the very least, requires a set of mechanisms via which intellectual life can be foregrounded in social activity.

Dallyn *et al* (2015) also look to reconsider the public intellectual, this time not as a form of public character but rather as a kind of *temperament*. They adopt a similar perspective to Fatsis in the sense that it resituates the concept away from the individual, of the independent spirit embodied in figures such as Sartre. This particular way of enacting public intellectualism, as a particular way of viewing the world, has particular resonance for the current plight of the modern academic embedded in highly regulated environments.

Dallyn *et al* (2015) suggest that two forms of academic public intellectual currently exist inside the university – one an integrated intellectual who works via their senior positions to engage the public, and the other a non-conformist academic who aims to critique the university from within as well as create networks outside the academy. Both of these however has been hindered by the obsession with journal publication, an obsession which ‘has had significant effects on the nature of writing, where texts are not so much written with a particular audience in mind as devised for a specialised and limited set of reviewers, whose blessing is integral to the process’ (Dallyn *et al*, 2015, p. 1033). They suggest that teaching ‘offers something of a last bastion for the intellectual’ (Dallyn *et al*, 2015, p. 1042). Whether or not teaching is a last resort is debatable but they are correct to argue for its significance in a transformed definition of the public intellectual. They build on Jacoby’s argument that teaching is less regulated and surveilled than other areas such as publications, but at the same time suggesting that the *digital sphere* now offers this opportunity to exercise the intellectual temperament in virtual public spaces, that can circumvent the power of traditional publishing.

In considering the future of the public intellectual, then, elements of each of these proposals can be used to good effect, with some level of reconstruction to enable greater synergy between the academy, the digital and the public sphere. This reconstruction has broadly three parts: 1) A reconsideration of the public sphere; 2) a recasting of academic scholarship in the digital era; and 3) a reconstruction of institutional impediments to the publicising of intellectual life. Each of these is addressed in turn below.

3. Reshaping the meaning of the public sphere

The focus on the public sphere is important here as public intellectuals operate in this space (Fatsis, 2016, p. 7). The public sphere was originally a conception of public space developed by Habermas in his classic text *The structural transformation of the public sphere* (1962/1989). Designed to account for the rise of a critical reasoning public in countries such as England in the 18th century, Habermas traced the development of this sphere from its original role as a mouthpiece for the state, to its transformation into a public debating chamber set against the interests of states. Greek in origin, conceptions of the ‘public’ and the ‘private’ and of the public sphere received a new lease of life with the growth of the modern state and of civil society alongside it. Habermas defined the public sphere thus:

The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people’s public use of their reason (*öffentliches Rasonnement*) (1989, p. 27).

As a mediator between society and the state, the public sphere for Habermas is a crucial element of a functioning democracy. It is the bearer of public opinion, which since the autocratic policies of monarchies ‘has made possible the democratic control of state activities’ (Habermas, 1989, p. 136). Keeping the state in check was aided by the development of new print media such as newspapers: as Habermas details in the *Structural transformation*, the English state in the 17th century attempted to assert its control over its publics via its own publications such as the Gazette of London, but as these developed, the

space for opinion formation, dissemination and critique grew through reviews and letter pages. Also important were meeting spaces such as the coffee houses of London and the salons of Paris, which expanded the interest and influence of aesthetic pursuits such as literature, influencing in particular the forms of public rationality that helped to generate political dissent.

For all its positive qualities in the formation of democratic governance, Habermas was at the same time pessimistic about the continuing strength of the public sphere as a space for intellectual life: ‘for about a century the social foundations of this sphere have been caught up in a process of decomposition’ (1989: 4) ... while its scope is expanding significantly, its function has become progressively insignificant’. The book concludes with the idea that 20th century modernisation has resulted in a regression of the concept and reality of the public sphere, one in which the notion of ‘publicity’ has been reduced to a public relations exercise.

The last couple of pages of the book see Habermas somewhat wistfully make a case for a critical publicity - a form of publicity that helps to keep power and domination in check (its proper function according to Habermas, 1989, p. 250). Now, given the fact that the public sphere as depicted by Habermas is as much a virtual sphere as a physical one (Knoppers, 2014), a case can be made that the promise of the public sphere could potentially find its realisation in its modern digitised form - the *digital public sphere*: that technologically-enabled online debating chamber comprised of social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, as well as the vast number of comments sections on newspaper websites, magazines and journals (Bessant, 2014, Dahlgren, 2007, Rasmussen, 2014; Valtysson 2017). This is a big if of course, given the tendency of some web-based interactions to degenerate and infantilise. Those who wish to engage with reasoned commentary and seek out useful information also

have to wade through a barrage of sarcasm, low-grade insult and uninformed polemic. At its worst the digital public sphere can appear fuelled by a combination of hateful contempt and open hostility to those who represent alternative viewpoints. Those in less powerful social positions, those who embody alternative lifestyles, all have to take extra care when engaging in debate.

4. Recasting academic scholarship in the digital era

This apparent corruption of the promise of online technologies and the opportunities they provide for reasoned debate, access to limitless knowledge and the democratic distribution of knowledge, is crying out for a more rigorous and well-evidenced set of interventions from the academic world. Admittedly this has already occurred to some extent. Scholarly activities are gradually being changed through the inevitable process of digitisation. Yet, the greatest differentiation digital scholarly activities present in comparison to more conventional ones lies in the almost ubiquitous accessibility academics have to distributed knowledge networks and the practices of openness that derive from participating in such social systems. The encounter of academics with the web can thus result in scholarly activities that are supported and enhanced by the use of the web and the ideas and movements associated with it. Digital scholarship practices, in this context, are heavily influenced by a growing culture of participation and sharing, openness and transparency of which the open access movement is one of the most prominent outcomes (see for example Jenkins, 2009; Pearce et al., 2012; Veletsianos, 2016).). Another aspect associated with the participatory culture, and which is key to understanding the recognition dilemma digital scholars face, is related to the gatekeeping of ideas and knowledge production. The web with its read and write features weakens the power of established gatekeepers - for example, publishers and academic

journals of great renown and longstanding tradition - as it gives its users the autonomy to circumvent publishing conventions through self-publication practices. This Do It Yourself (DIY) approach disturbs the canons of academic publishing whilst raising questions about intellectual authority, ownership and recognition.

Looking at the web beyond its functional use as a tool and interpreting it simultaneously as a field of practice and a space of empowerment leads to new understandings of digital practices. From a digital scholarship perspective the web thus represents a new, alternative space where intellectual work can be discussed, published and made openly available to a wider range of communities. The association of new technologies with scholarly activity implies more than a process of digitisation of academic content; it marks a new shift in academic practice from a formal, one-dimensional type of communication to different forms of engagement with academic knowledge within and beyond the academy (Costa, 2014, 2015; Costa and Murphy, 2016a; Veletsianos, 2016). The emergence of DIY tools such as blogs, wikis as well as other platforms for open communication and social congregation has given rise to a digital scholarship culture that is epitomised by a perceived liberation of the academic as consumer, producer and publisher of knowledge for the public good (Drezner, 2009). This liberation has had the effect of expanding and diversifying the field of digital scholarship. This can be witnessed for example in the proliferation of collaborative magazine-style websites like [The New Inquiry](#), [A Public Space](#), [The Society Pages](#) and [Warscapes](#). But there are numerous other digital initiatives that share a commitment to open access and the sharing of knowledge across academic and non-academic audiences¹.

5. Reconstructing the University

But as with all forms of innovation, the novelty of these new forms of engagement tends to wear off when confronted with the reality of digital scholarship. This reality is shaped by the politics of higher education – the university and its hinterland. The challenges that would naturally be brought to bear on digital scholarship – time, engagement, impact, status, esteem – tend to be magnified in the world of academia. Those unused to the peculiarities of academic life might think that the opportunities provided by digital scholarship – publishing, access, impact, networking, dissemination – would prove attractive to academics keen to promote their work and engage with a wider public. To some extent, they are right, but in other ways this innocent-eyed take is wide of the mark. The ideals of digital scholarship are tempered by the realities of academia, with its powerful prestige economy alongside the pressures of a diversified workload. While digital scholarship provides routes to publishing and impact - so important to the modern university – taking advantage of the digital revolution should come with an advisory sticker attached. Because it is not so much about publishing and impact, but the *right kind* of publishing and impact (Costa and Murphy, 2016b).

This is not to suggest that traditional and digital scholarship are polar opposites. They are not, at least they should not be and this debate should not be seen in either/or terms. There is much scope for them to complement one another, but so far they offer a confusing landscape within which to ply the academic trade, the ‘should I/shouldn’t I’ question asked by many scholars who are keen to engage, but unsure as to the consequences. One of the reasons for this is the pace of change – the social media platforms have developed at speed while institutions and traditional publishers are left behind. The ‘rules of the game’ to quote Bourdieu, have not even been written yet.

Another reason why this expansion and diversification of publishing is problematic relates to the culture of accountability so prevalent in institutions of higher education (Murphy, 2009): it is the impact of digital technologies on the publishing realm that is problematic when it comes to accountability and performance measures, specifically the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK. Academics now have the opportunity to publish via a vast assortment of open access platforms, some of which provide access to a much greater readership than offered by more traditional ‘closed’ journals. i.e., they provide the potential for much greater societal reach. The digital world provides an arena of riches for academics who wish to exercise their academic freedom, an exercise that on paper should be encouraged as it places academics in the public eye and away from the oft-criticised ivory tower of traditional academia. It fits well with a pronounced and highly visible effort, via the likes of funding mechanisms, to lever a transformation in academic work away from insularity and disciplinarity and towards societal impact. But yet questions remain, questions about prestige reputation and status. The digital revolution offers different outlets for publication, not all of which are currently recognised as legitimate. What counts and what does not count as a credible publication is of special significance here, and as a result the question can be framed as: where does digital scholarship fit within an increasing accountability culture?

This new bureaucracy of accountability has undoubtedly altered the landscape of academia. More specifically, the implementation of quality assurance mechanisms such as the REF and Annual Performance Reviews (APRs) of staff have opened up the Academy to ever greater scrutiny, a situation that is likely to increase in the UK given the development of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). Unsurprisingly, the spread of an accountability culture has not gone uncontested, and a strong suspicion persists that a culture of accountability has helped to erode the foundations of academic life (Beck and Young, 2005;

Clegg, 2008; McWilliam, 2004; Schwier 2012, Shore 2008),). As tools of regulation, such mechanisms are accused of, among other things, undermining professional autonomy, instrumentalising academic outputs and trivialising democracy (Murphy, 2016). They are also susceptible to the widely acknowledged consequences of reform measures, such as institutionalised gaming and forms of impression management. Attempts to manage and control outcomes via mechanisms such as REF and APRs face numerous difficulties with the gap between the ideal and reality being often too wide to deliver the desired outcomes (Elton, 1988).

On top of this implementation gap, accountability policies now have to increasingly deal with the influence of digital culture. Attempts to manage and control professional and intellectual environments now have to deal with a porous world of information, accessibility and increased efforts to autonomise the publication of knowledge, chiefly by bypassing key traditional gatekeepers such as publishing houses and established journals. Given the value placed on elite knowledge production, the future of closed accountability systems when it comes to professional outcomes is open to question, at the very least.

This fact points in the direction of a recasted version of academic accountability, one that embraces the inevitable rise of open digital scholarship and seeks instead to measure the quality of it alongside the traditional closed systems of outputs. There are strategic decisions that need to be made by academic institutions which are faced with ever greater challenges to their authority than those envisaged by Lyotard in the postmodern condition (Lyotard, 1984). If peer review is to remain a key form of quality assurance, imaginative thinking needs to be put into how such a scheme can be set up for forms of digital scholarship. This may not go down well with those who see digital scholars as a radical alternative to traditional academic

work, and see traditional peer review as a tool of reproduction. But there is more to be gained by exploring the synergies between them than creating further barriers to progress. There is a more worthy goal at stake – than of recasting public intellectualism in a digital world. Accommodation therefore needs to be sought with the mechanisms that legitimise the university rather than aiming to destabilise them. There have been initiatives around post-publication review, metrics and readership to gauge quality and these may offer in modified form a future model that digital scholars can engage with. This would also have the added bonus of potentially reducing the already time consuming work that goes into pre-publication review.

This issue – of pre or post publication review - strikes at the heart of the debate over traditional/digital scholarship. The openness of digital scholarship, not just to readers but also to writers is a direct threat to the existing order of things. But publishing houses no longer have a monopoly on the capacity to publish, and it could easily be the case that the system of academic gatekeeping around publicising ideas will be viewed as arcane and even undemocratic. Also, the imagination does not need to be overstretched to consider some form of compromise position between pre and post review, involving a combination of both in the desire to inform and influence public opinion.

This issue, of ensuring both quality and accountability, while important, is not the only impediment when it comes to generating a public intellectualism fit for the digital world. Any efforts at institutional transformation must also consider the future of disciplinarity and academic knowledge, alongside the more intersubjective concerns over academic recognition and respect.

The future of disciplinarity: This increased focus on accountability and digital scholarship present the most recent challenges to intellectual life in the academy. They complicate already existing ‘threats’ to intellectual life, most notably the conflicted terrains of disciplinarity, academic knowledge and the struggle for recognition in the academy. The issue of accountability is arguably overshadowed by a greater barrier to the rise of the digital public intellectual – disciplinarity. ‘Disciplinarity’ as a professional ethos also contributes to academic insularity, producing a situation in which disciplines can and have become ‘prisoners of their own discourses’ (Simons, 2006, p. 46). Increasing numbers of specialist subjects and the tight bond between academic and parent discipline are not factors that help encourage inter or multidisciplinary approaches to intellectual life, which could alleviate some of the insularity common to the university. This situation is not helped by a conflation of academic professionalism with academic freedom, which, can all too easily be viewed as self-serving (Nixon, 2001).

This more politically engaged version of academic autonomy could be facilitated by a reconstituting disciplinarity as a professional and organisational orientation. Although an interdisciplinary approach is ‘only as good as the disciplinary traditions which sustain it’ (Nixon, 2001, p. 182), disciplines and their gatekeepers must be willing to question the paradigmatic nature of disciplinary knowledge. The disciplines must seek meaning in a notion of research and education that is more socially engaged, i.e., that is ‘determined by the challenges that are being articulated in the lines of fractures of society itself’ (Simons, 2006, p. 46). Disciplines after all, are the product of historical context, emerging ‘from a certain cultural and social milieu’ (Sardar, 2010, p. 181). They are not immovable objects, to be preserved in aspic.

Academic knowledge and public intellectualism: Academic knowledge, as embedded in the curriculum, has on a number of occasions acted a lightning rod for activists who view course syllabi as a generator of inequality. Course syllabi, those seemingly mundane and functional institutional artefacts, have come under increased scrutiny for their valued-laden, ideologically- biased forms of knowledge construction. The *Why is my Curriculum White* movement is a good example, a movement which is joined by a call to ‘decolonise’ the university. This call to subvert and undo the legacy of colonial thinking has built up considerable momentum in recent years, and spans the range of disciplinary work, from Medicine (Nazar et al, 2015) to International Relations (Capan, 2017) and War Studies (Barkawi, 2016). These forms of questioning, of the legitimacy and authority of institutions as gatekeepers and guardians of knowledge, are real threats to the university and should be taken as such in a world in which access to forms of counter-knowledge are more accessible than ever (Peters, 2007; Peters et al, 2012).

But these attacks on the knowledge claims of universities are nothing new. There are precursors in the shape of student movements of the 1960s in the US, Germany and France. For example, one of the key members of the Frankfurt School, Theodor Adorno, faced the ignominy of students taking over his sociology course as they called for reform. A leaflet distributed by the students criticised the University for delivering an approach to sociology ‘that allows no space for the students to organise their own studies’ (cited in Jeffries, 2016, p. 345). In the same pamphlet, they took the university to task for giving them degrees that could only make them functioning parts of what they considered an authoritarian state.

Such a critique of graduate employability and the value of university degrees was also an issue in the more famous 1968 student revolts in France. This saw a nation-wide student

protest against a number of issues, but it included their experience in the French university sector. In *Homo Academicus* (1988), Bourdieu argued that the crisis of 1968 was caused in large part by humanities and social sciences students who felt that their courses were not fit for the purpose of making them employable in respectable jobs with good career opportunities; that the structure of the curriculum and the kinds of knowledge seen as valuable by the French elite did not equip them adequately for modern professional life in the 20th century.

Instead of viewing such protests as isolated historical examples, these events should be considered as cases of a much wider questioning of academic knowledge, less as exceptions and more as representative of broader opinion about the place of universities in public life. They also testify to the problematic nature of disciplinarity in the academy, particularly in cases where rigid disciplinary knowledge bases can be viewed as self-serving and out-of-touch in a world used to disruptive technologies such as Google and Wikipedia. This is not to ignore the fact that the likes of Google and Wikipedia can act as knowledge gatekeepers in their own right, and their forms of knowledge brokerage come with strings attached. But such concerns do not negate the questions they raise about the often myopic tendencies of academic knowledge production.

The struggle for academic recognition: As well as this external pressure to legitimise and justify academic work, academics who yearn to engage with public intellectual work must also face professional forms of justification and legitimation. Reputation and recognition are prized commodities not only at an inter-institutional level but also at an intersubjective one (O'Neill and Smith, 2012): as forms of control, their sources of power emanate from emotional contexts, as reputation and status at a professional level constitute respect

(Honneth, 2007). Digital scholars are not immune from the need for this form of recognition, and are as much at the mercy of peer review, if not more so, than traditional scholars. Investing time and effort in digital forms of scholarly activity is a precarious activity for academics, given that such activity offers little reward and legitimation in the court of academic judgement. Indeed, the jury is out on whether such forms of scholarship such as micro-blogging will ever gain acceptance in a notoriously conservative professional culture. The risks, at a recognitional level, are potentially great, while also difficult to quantify.

It is fair to say that institutional life in the academy operates on the basis of a prestige economy, but the task of maintaining and protecting this economy does not fall solely on the shoulder of locational forms of recognition; the engine of growth here finds its fuel in an emotional terrain that is impossible for academics to avoid and yet remains invisible to those that only see power emanating through officially sanctioned forms of judgement. Hence the pressing need to reconsider the ways in which the ‘worth’ of academics are assessed and judged to be of sufficient quality. .

It is also fair to suggest that the institutional factors mentioned above are not the only factors at play when it comes to academics engaging in the digital sphere. There is a substantial degree of heterogeneity across the academic profession, and it is entirely plausible that some academics view intellectual life as a sanctuary away from the ever-present 24-hour culture of digital communications. The individual aspirations and ambitions of academics should not be overlooked in the search for a one-size fits all approach to fostering digital scholarship as a route to a renewed public intellectualism. The same applies to the wide diversity of locations that academics find themselves in. The generalised critique outline above is tempered by the fact that academics are situated in distinct local and national contexts which may already

demand much from them in terms of public intellectual life. This may to some extent mitigate the desire on their part to see digital scholarship as the main route to deliberative forms of democracy.

6. Conclusion

The rise of the digitised public intellectual will march on, regardless of what the university does or does not do (Lange, 2015). It is also the case that the university itself as an institutional force is currently undergoing considerable change and is being reimagined in various ways (Barnett, 2013, 2016; Robertson, 2017). Nevertheless, existing in tandem with these developments is a still strong desire on the part of both publics and the academy to engage with ideas in the public arena (Burawoy, 2005; Lilla, 2001; McLaughlin, 2005; McLaughlin and Toney, 2011). The need for public intellectualism is arguably greater than ever (Elshtain, 2014).

In order to meet this need and effectively anticipate the future in already existing phenomenon, universities must do the following: confront the barriers caused by an over-emphasis on disciplinarity at the expense of engaging more fully with the concerns emanating from the digital public sphere – which can be achieved by fostering connections between disciplines via issue-specific research clusters; consider the ways in which knowledge is produced outside the academy and how this can help shape future academic work, taking the notion of co-production more seriously for example by including non-academic partners in the research and curriculum design process; and examine the existing forms of academic recognition and accountability and how these in reconfigured forms can better serve the

digitally-engaged intellectual – this can be achieved by constructing mechanisms for measuring quality and impact of digital scholarship.

These conditions act as prerequisites to a reimagined future of public intellectualism, one in which the university plays a significant role. These conditions effectively need to be met before academic life can more readily and willingly engage in forms of *public pedagogy* - a pedagogy that represents a more sustained and proactive engagement with the digital public sphere. A public pedagogy positions the university as a mechanism for ‘mediating publicness’ (Newman & Clarke, 2009, p. 132), that is, as an institution that works as an active agent in fostering deliberation and engagement in the digital public sphere (Murphy, 2011). These forms of critical dialogue can build on the meeting of the conditions set out above – public facing, co-producing and democratising – and establish a new set of educative relations between higher education institutions and the public.

At the same time, mechanisms are needed in order for critical dialogue to take place, given that currently the digital public sphere resembles a gladiatorial arena, with little space for consensus formation. This old model has been effectively transferred onto the digital realm without modification and even without some of its more effective aspects: how can this sphere operate more like a learning space? The republic of blogs as Dunleavy names it (Dunleavy, 2012) needs direction and the academic sphere would be best placed to offer this – a relatively autonomous space. Fortunately the university does not have to build this blogosphere as it is being built already, which is the good news. This counteracts to some extent the bad news that universities are losing their grip on knowledge production and dissemination. The university can lead the way on creating these learning mechanisms which

can help create distance between it and the traditional media of academic journals, which are already losing their grip on legitimation.

Thinking about public pedagogy in this way is an acknowledgement that the existing instruments of pedagogy have lost some of their utility, that journals for example are an outdated mode of transmission and dissemination. While difficult to confirm in any meaningful way, it is possible that the locus of control when it comes to learning has started to (slowly) shift away from the academy and into the digital sphere. The question, then, of the future of public intellectualism, is not just a question of repositioning the public intellectual, but also how we consider scholarship and the university itself. The demand and desire for new forms of public intellectualism goes much further than calls for evidence-based policy and increased critical literacy. Instead, the onus is now on academic life to do what it does best – connecting theory to practice, but to do this in reconstituted ways in the public eye; making these connections stronger in order to help ideas flourish and disseminate in the digital public sphere. This shift in focus and alignment would assist the university in its desire to encourage public engagement, an activity that this reconstituted public intellectualism is perfectly designed for.

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ⁱ See for examples, the likes of [economic sociology](#), [Progressive geographies](#), [Anthropology works](#), [New books network](#), [Filosofia](#) and [Platformia Sociologica](#). There are also other online sites that act as centres and platforms for educational and conference initiatives – see the likes of the [Global Centre for Advanced Studies](#) and [Centre for Research in Social Sciences and Humanities](#).