

'What does it mean to be a public intellectual?

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Introduction - John

Over the last 2 years at the University of York we have been exploring the subject of the public intellectual. We have given sessions for new lecturers in our Post Graduate Certificate in Academic Practice where I have got people to think about the different dimensions of the public intellectual. We have run 3 open sessions for mostly experienced academics where I have invited 3 or 4 lecturers from science, arts and social science to give a ten minute account of their views which we have then used in the session to generate discussion and it is these sessions that provide the source for our discussion today.

I give a minimal introductory brief – I just say that there is no institutional agenda save wanting to support the exchange of ideas and explore the interesting topic of the public Intellectual but what they say is wholly up to them. If they press me for some starting suggestions I say that I am looking for what the public intellectual might be, what it might become, its tensions, its changes, its history, its locations, its roles, its responsibilities, its status and its ideological conditions. If they want even more direction I say that I'm interested in how they feel about their role, what identity they feel they should have / or adopt and what voice they think they have.

All the sessions have been interesting and the feedback has been uniformly good with everyone wanting to carry on with the discussion either then or later and we have more planned for next term and beyond. I've not had any problems getting people to speak and there seems to be a kind of thirst to discuss this especially in a way that is not driven by some kind of institutional agenda – so it's not bound into a training course or some element of directed CPD. It seems as if the contributors relish the opportunity to talk about something that is important to them in an open and free way.

In practice the discussions have ranged over a huge range of issues which we are going to try and distill here today.

Clearly HE is going through change. We have huge numbers of students, we have the students paying for their courses (a development which shifts the grounds of accountability), we have new technologies and we have an increasingly managed performance measured culture. We also have a highly instrumentalised target driven schooling system in which students are taught strictly to the test and come to HE with preset ideas about the nature of learning that are very often inconsistent with the pedagogical assumptions of their higher degree courses. Our question is 'what is our public role in these changing times?'

Like most ideas placed on the analytical dissecting table and given the treatment, the notion of the public intellectual becomes unstable, complex and multiple. The

discussions didn't yield a coherent idea of what the public intellectual was but they did reveal at least some of its various interpretations and potential meanings.

The Public and The Intellectual – Duncan

Before considering the activities or purpose of a public intellectual, it is worth reflecting a little upon what a public intellectual *is* and/or who a public intellectual might be. Superficially, this is perhaps not a contentious question or one difficult to resolve. For example, the term is in common enough use to have its own definition in the Oxford English Dictionary; according to the OED a public intellectual is:

“...an intellectual who expresses views (especially on popular topics) intended to be accessible to a general audience.”

Clear enough, perhaps; however, I find this assertion a little unsatisfying. It is paradoxically both a broad sweep definition which lacks explanatory precision on the one hand, whilst perhaps excessively restrictive in scope on the other. That being the case, we are going to spend a few minutes deconstructing the term 'public intellectual' to try and draw out the full scope of its possible meaning or meanings. For the purpose of this talk, deconstruction will involve the disaggregation of the composite parts of the term and exposing them to questions or possibilities. The objective is not necessarily to reach a constraining definition, but rather to elucidate a range of possibilities and combinations.

To start back to front, in the twenty-first century, what does it mean to be considered an 'intellectual'? In posing this as a question, it is necessary to address our analysis in terms of a set of questions.

Is an intellectual only someone whose profession is defined by their personal intellectualism and their freedom within a recognised job role to pursue their intellectual interests? Specifically, is an intellectual someone who works in the domain of academia? Is it this ability to be a free-roving seeker of knowledge and understanding that defines the intellectual of public intellectual? Traditionally, there can be few other professions where an individual is given the leeway and the flexibility to choose their own focus of investigative endeavour. Of course, if this is a valid interpretation how do broader contextual realities impinge upon our definition? Does the current restriction on research funding, the allocation of public monies to particular research priorities and the pressure for corresponding institutional prioritisation - which may very well impact upon personal freedom - also impact upon the concept of intellectualism? The question of flux and evolution in the figure of the public intellectual as a result of changing context will emerge and re-emerge through the course of this talk.

We could go further. For example, is it only a 'lecturer' as someone engaged in primary research and who is personally responsible for chipping away at the cutting edge of knowledge and understanding in a particular field or fields who can be considered a public intellectual? Or can other individuals – for example

teaching fellows - who might, as part of their role, engage in secondary research or other intellectually creative work also lay claim to the title?

Perhaps an intellectual is anyone who is thinking critically and employing a perspective that is informed and supported by systematic analysis? This raises the question of whether there is a differentiation between an individual who is a public intellectual and an individual who is a member of the intellectual public? Could intellectual in this capacity relate to a politician, an industrialist, a journalist, a doctor or a civil servant ... or an entertainer - Billy Connolly perhaps? Could it be a sportsman, an astronaut or a dustman? Again we are led to a list of possibilities in defining intellectualism. Is it the process of coming to an informed view point or opinion? Is it simply the mastery of factual information and insight that can be employed in the answer to specific questions? Is it the pursuit of new knowledge and understanding? Or perhaps the employment of methodological and cognitive training and techniques to break open new insights into the world, its works and its workings? Is it merely the ability to pontificate and debate from a foundation of sound general knowledge?

Is an intellectual who is a public intellectual someone who is talking from a position of expertise, or are they talking by virtue of having a position of expertise? Are there hierarchies of public intellectual, for instance:

- Is it someone who is consulted because of their recognised command of a specific topic (e.g. Dr Nigel Cassidy who spoke on Radio 5's *Drive Time* a couple of weeks ago about the sink hole in Florida?)
- Is a public intellectual someone who talks from a position of specific expertise on a general topic related to that expertise (e.g. Brian Cox talking about all things astronomical and physics/science related?)
- Is a public intellectual someone who talks from a position of specific expertise on a general topic (e.g. Noam Chomsky or Simon Schama speaking on anything that takes their fancy?)
- Is a public intellectual someone who talks about anything whether they have any recognised specific expertise or not? (Tony Robinson?)

These possibilities are not intended to be raised as dichotomies, as one or the other, but only as possibilities that will allow the full scope of the term's boundaries to be defined. And, self-evidently, being an intellectual or thinking intellectually is only one part of what it must be to be considered a public intellectual. Who, or what, in all of this are the 'public'?

Is it the case that a single monolithic public can be identified at all, or is it necessary to consider a postmodern range of different publics. Indeed, is the public necessarily even a bodily manifestation? I am going to identify some possibilities which again are not intended to be couched in mutually exclusive terms, nor to provide any overriding truth, but rather only to highlight some ambiguity to, or ambiguity in, the term.

Does the 'public' of the public intellectual constitute having direct communication with the public? This is perhaps a conventional interpretation – one expressed in the OED definition cited previously. If this is the case, how do we define the parameters of who the people comprising the 'public' are? Is it anyone outside, for example, academia or are employees and participants of academia public in themselves? Is giving a research seminar, or teaching an undergraduate module as much an exercise in public intellectualism as contributing towards a debate on Melvyn Bragg's *In Our Time* Radio 4 programme? If I am engaging someone in a conversation down the pub about research I might be engaged in, am I engaging in public intellectualism? Depending on scale here, it is possible to argue that either the vast majority of academics could / are public intellectuals or the majority, in fact, are not.

Another dimension to consider is whether or not the public in public intellectual simply means working on behalf of the public, for the public good, whether communicating directly with them or not. Does the public need to be exposed to the name of a person, to their voice, their appearance for that person to be considered a public intellectual or is it enough that the outcome of their endeavours, however indirectly or at whatever scale, impact upon the lives of (some of) the public in some way? And further, does there have to be a measure of *impact* of work upon the public for someone to be considered a public intellectual.

Alternatively, it could be considered that to engage in intellectualism that is public simply means receiving public money to undertake [in this case intellectual] work – in effect a public sector worker. This would imply that all university staff who are engaged with intellectual pursuits are by default public intellectuals due to salaries, in the majority of cases, being financed to differing extent from public monies. This would mean that those staff whose salaries are paid from other monies – private funding, consultancy etc. are by default *not* public intellectuals. In this context, we can see that in the apparent shift towards the private university the role of the public intellectual could be changing. Is it the case, for example, that academics working for Grayling's New College of the Humanities should not be considered as public intellectuals in the same way as academics working in publically funded universities because they operate within the confines of a wholly private institution?

Finally, is the public of public intellectual defined simply by being a member of the public engaged in intellectual pursuits? Is anyone, whether inside or outside of the university, by virtue of pursuing intellectual interests (however we define intellectual) inherently a public intellectual? Perhaps we have come back to the question of Billy Connolly as public intellectual again.

Positions have emerged in our discussions – John

These are some of the main positions articulated by our contributors and interpreted by me. It is by no means an exhaustive list – it is just the main ones that came up. There is no space to examine them in detail and they are not mutually exclusive. Some of them lead off into areas which appear as tangential to the domain of the 'public intellectual'.

1. The public intellectual as dissenter

One powerfully articulated position from a social scientist was that in order to analyse the world we live in, in order to identify the spirit of our times, judge its worth, relevance, origins and futures, we must ourselves be dissenters from that spirit. We have to be outsiders in order to apprehend the foundations of dominant ideas. We have to be uncomfortable with the world and a stranger to it. Our default position must be not to believe what we are told. As such the public intellectual exists as a political radical at least in epistemological terms.

This position, which I personally find quite attractive, leaves the public intellectual in an intrinsically uncomfortable position in a workplace that assumes a shared mission and applies quality controls. For Arts and Social Science lecturers this reflexive awareness is in a sense the name of the game as practitioners attempt to reveal the foundational assumptions with which they themselves work. But it has different, although probably not entirely different, connotations in science where rigorous and constant testing is the *modus operandi*.

One reality-check to our discussion was when a contributor from Iraq vividly accounted the compromises of an intellectual in post-Saddam Hussein Iraq, pointing up the very real consequences for dissension. It was noted that, in times and places of social conflict, there are genuine dangers in being identified as a public intellectual.

2. The public intellectual as revealer of truth

This position has strong affiliations with the first and comes from analytical philosophy. Applied to the current world of HE, it points up the problem with the dominance of performance management and the current research assessment exercise (The REF) where ends have become confused with means. By focusing either on NSS scores or the measurable impacts of research, the assumption is that learning is a product to be achieved and can be secured as measurable and thereby evaluated and improved. Of the many articulations of this view it was pointed out that learning can be many things – it can be a process, a discussion, a personal development, an insight.

This position which was expressed widely in many different ways and with considerable frustration, sees the current expectations of the culture of HE as negatively limiting for the intellectual endeavoring to reveal the truth. Here the lecturer is swimming against the tide of dominant and institutional expectations. The impact and measurables agenda forces the intellectual to account what they do in ways that contort what they think they should be doing.

Under this view the public intellectual is artificially constrained in trying to reveal the truth of things and unreasonably hampered by cultural expectations that blind rather than reveal.

3. The public intellectual as thinker

This position saw intrinsic and justifiable merit in the intellectual pursuit of ideas for themselves. Just thinking, entertaining and exploring ideas is good enough. The public intellectual is in the admittedly privileged position of being able to treat ideas in ways in which others aren't but has no moral or political obligation to extend the consequences of such ideas and thinking, into the world itself.

Charges of accountability, utility and elitism could clearly be levied here but in view of the question of what HE is really for in our new age in which there are unlikely to be so many life-time career options for which a degree is an established pathway, the purely intrinsic and life enhancing benefits of study might be important in re-configuring what HE is for and what the public intellectual's role in that reconfiguring is. To some extent, therefore, the experience of higher education is itself a process of creating public intellectuals.

4. The public intellectual as expert

One contributor recalled their role as an expert witness in a high profile case and used the experience to analyse how they had fulfilled the role of, if not public intellectual, public expert. Their view was that our culture requires experts as the generality of folk are not in a position to know specific things. Therefore the public intellectual/expert fulfills an important function in the decision over specific matters.

This public role is one that many recognised – many had been called to speak on or adjudicate about particular matters. Indeed the whole business of publications, conferencing and teaching in general carries this 'expert' type function. This version of the public figure is not without its problems as 'experts' in many fields can say diametrically opposite things and are not without their own agendas and drivers which influence what they say. Furthermore there are post modernist and related arguments that dispute the assumptions of the 'expert' voice.

Notwithstanding such arguments however, it is this 'voice' that is one of the most important factors in relation to the public intellectual. The fact is that we do have a voice with some kind of status attached.

5. The public intellectual as media superstar

In every session, reference was made to high profile public intellectuals. David Starkey, Brian Cox and others bring their academic pedigree to their media roles and it is their origins from within academia that confers authority to their words. They could be variously seen as 'intellectual', 'expert' or 'academic' but they have certainly become 'public'. Some in our sessions could not identify with these figures seeing them as fulfilling something quite distinct – as popular and commercially packaged figures constructed for the media. Others felt more comfortable perhaps even seeing a potential for their own voice in such public presentations.

The distinction in how people responded to such figures when they compared them to their own roles, was that some seemed to feel such public presentations enhanced the project of Higher Education and thereby their own roles in it. Others felt precisely the opposite that such representations somehow took value away from the project of Higher education – as if lowering its intellectual pretensions and thereby undermining their own positions.

6. The public intellectual as knowledge gatekeeper

The first of our open discussions revealed an interesting binary. One lecturer was very enthusiastic and supportive of the use of Youtube, TED and similar for the presentation of bite-size gobbets of information and ideas. Another lecturer was vehemently opposed to this on grounds that such short packaged and served up pieces of information could never do justice to the information or idea itself. They felt that what we are doing in HE is cultivating an in-depth, nuanced and critical understanding and as such, such convenient inevitably simplistic accounts have no place in our work and by implication, not what we as intellectuals – public or otherwise – should be doing.

These polar positions began to reveal quite stark differences in assumptions about the nature and ownership of knowledge with the former position emphasizing the fast accessibility of knowledge and the latter the need for a slower careful consideration. The discussion led to the question of what the public intellectual's role is in communicating ideas and knowledge.

Communication – Duncan

I am just going to pick up, briefly, for the final part of this talk on the question of 'communication' and to introduce an additional facet of uncertainty to the question *What is a public intellectual?*

What has emerged so far, perhaps, is that there is no simple answer as to who can lay claim to the title, nor to what the role of a public intellectual entails. If anything, this uncertainty is more emphasised and stark now than it has ever been in the past. There are likely a host of reasons for this, several of which have already been touched upon: for instance, the increasing privatisation of UK higher education and the increasing requirement for academics to demonstrate the societal value of their work through impact and impact statements. But there is something else I would like to introduce at this stage which may be fundamental, and that is this question of communication.

Arguably, what might define public intellectualism, from just intellectualism in any case, is the ability to communicate the results or the processes of intellectual activity. Without communication, perhaps the concept of the public intellectual is empty? But we live now in an age where communication is changing. In the past the opportunity to 'talk' to large audiences has been restricted and controlled. In Medieval England, Lords wielded judgement over the people of their lands in feudal courts; priests preached – eventually in English – from the pulpit. In the 18th and 19th centuries, radicals and radical organisations were able to

disseminate their arguments and views through access to printing presses; in the 20th century the professionally controlled television, radio and print media dominated. In all these cases, the flow of information to the public was, often wholly, controlled by some notional authority or otherwise by those with specific knowledge, expertise or access to expensive equipment to whom certain individuals might be granted privileged access.

We live in a different world now (or at least those of us in the 'West' do); a world of social media, where anyone can have a view and disseminate it for anyone else to see relatively cheaply and with relatively little technical proficiency. Potentially everyone could be an expert on anything, or at least have a view on everything for anybody else to see. There is no longer a strict division between the controllers of communication and the consumers of communication, nor necessarily such a formalised relationship between the producers of knowledge and disseminators of knowledge. Does this have the potential to mean that everyone in the West can be a public intellectual? And further could one's success on Facebook and Twitter indicate your status as a public intellectual? You need, after all, only secure around 36 million followers to beat Justing Bieber into second place on Twitter. Perhaps more realistically, securing 29 million would move you above Barak Obama into fourth place. Failing that, a mere 6.5 million would top the Dalai Lama (87th place) and besting Billy Connolly, currently wallowing in position 13,126th with just 104,271 followers should be a breeze...

More seriously, is it the case that the term public intellectual actually has been rendered useless by the information age? Or if not rendered useless, is it not in a state of flux or metamorphosis? How does the term 'public intellectual' stand up to the egalitarian consequences of open access to knowledge and its dissemination? And further, how can the academic, who must surely have a claim to the title public intellectual, retain that claim against the background of our new circumstances?

Our position – John

We have reported what went on but we felt that we should give some indication of what we feel is important about our discussion of the public intellectual.

We feel that the role of public intellectual as dissenter is vital although we might call it something like 'critical dissenter'. We have to have the intellectual freedom to operate freely and reveal truth as we see it. To do so our voices have to have legitimacy and support from within the institutions we work. This can leave the academic in a position of inherent tension when they work in a culture that many of us experience at least, as trying to undermine individual intellectual freedoms in the interests of corporate success and market share.

The word 'integrity' appeared in various ways throughout our discussions. It felt as if this word encapsulated the one shared aspiration of most of our contributors. Again many felt that the culture of managerial performance goal setting, instead of enhancing their sense of integrity of purpose or being, worked in the opposite direction.

As two people involved in nurturing teachers and learners in HE, we feel that we can get the best out of our lecturers, enable them to feel good about their work and generate that sense of personal integrity by maintaining and quite possibly defending, a culture of trust and value.