This is the published version:

Atherton, Cassandra L. 2015, 'Very inflated rhetoric polysyllables and so on': the public intellectual and jargon in the academy, Media international Australia, no. 156, pp. 98-107.

Available from Deakin Research Online:

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30078663

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner.

Copyright: 2015, University of Queensland
‘VERY INFLATED RHETORIC, POLYSYLLABLES AND SO ON’: THE PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL AND JARGON IN THE ACADEMY

Abstract

The public intellectual, by their very definition, aims to reach a large sector of the public or publics. This requires proficiency, or at least the capacity to communicate in a variety of forms. As a large proportion of the public, to which the public intellectual appeals, is an online or cyber public, the importance of blogs in a computer-literate public cannot be under-estimated. The immediacy of the blog and the way in which an online presence facilitates immediate communication between the public and the public intellectual through the posting of comments online allow for a broad recognition of the intellectual in the public arena. My arguments will hinge on my interviews with contemporary American public intellectuals (Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, Todd Gitlin, Camille Paglia and Stephen Greenblatt) and their views on communication in a society experiencing a decline in the publication of print media.

The public intellectual, by their very definition, aims to reach a broad sector of the public or publics – given that, as Susan Buck-Mores (cited in Oslander, 2007: 111) argues, ‘the masses are converting themselves into a multiplicity of publics … that observe, listen and talk in a critical fashion’. This requires proficiency, or at least the capacity to communicate in a variety of forms and in a common language. While a scholar is most often a private intellectual, this article focuses on those public intellectuals in the humanities who work in academia. This is because they are irrevocably connected. Thomas Medvetz (2012: 221) identifies this when he argues that, ‘Wherever one finds mention of the public intellectual, two other idea-types are never far behind. The first is the so-called “ivory tower” figure.’ Since Russell Jacoby posited that the public intellectuals of the past entered the realm of academia and became irrelevant to the general public, discussions of public intellectualism continue to reference the university system. This ‘professionalization and academization’ of public intellectuals preceded their retreat into private language and disciplinary jargon (Jacoby, 2008: B5). This article uses the author’s interviews with American public intellectuals, both in and out of the academy, to contend that intellectuals in the academy must abandon exclusionary jargon and find ways to express themselves in the new media if they intend to be identified as public intellectuals. This is because they need a public presence and the immediacy of publication to be relevant. As P.L. Thomas (2013) argues, ‘Twitter and blogging can be powerful mechanisms for creating a public presence, mechanisms that circumvent traditional barriers to becoming a public intellectual.’
The ivory tower and jargon

The public intellectual in the ivory tower is expected to have a foot in both the academic work in the academy and the public sphere, and therefore must be able to communicate ideas clearly and in a compelling manner to both an academic audience and a series of publics. The challenge for academic public intellectuals is navigating and managing their working environment in order to work beyond it. This is because fraternising with a community of fellow thinkers in the academy, coupled with the expectations required for tenure, often leads to the publication of articles and books for other like-minded scholars, rather than any engagement with any kind of public. Scott (cited in Etzioni and Bowditch, 2006: 37) wittily labels these kinds of publications ‘those journals ... read by three people and your mother’. P.L. Thomas (2013) concurs in his discussion of public intellectuals:

Before the new media exploded, public intellectuals depended on the traditional media – newspapers, magazines, and TV – for access to the public. Educators and academics had to find time to submit Op-Eds or public writing (and then that work had to be accepted and published) or had to wait for invitations to participate in that traditional media. Certainly academic and scholarly public intellectuals must navigate challenges to their credibility and traditional biases against public work.

He suggests that this preference was ‘before the new media’, yet the academy’s preference and bias for traditional publications remain relatively unchanged despite the advance of the new media. Perhaps this is why the ‘conventional image [of] ivory tower intellectuals [as] both autonomous and disengaged from public debate because of their esotericism, their self-absorption, or some other form of social closure’ prevails (Medvetz, 2012: 89). This works against the aspiring public intellectual’s need to reach a range of publics ‘that lack familiarity with disciplinary discourses’ because these traditional publications reach only a very narrow and often specialised audience, and are frequently divorced from ‘real world issues and concerns’ (Behm et al. 2014). Traditional media outputs and their lack of immediacy also work against the public intellectual’s relevance. As Thomas (2013) suggests, ‘waiting for invitations’ and the delay in publishing in print media can no longer compete with the new media’s up-to-the-minute commentary. In this way, public intellectuals in the academy who rely solely on traditional forms of publication for public commentary are made irrelevant by those public intellectuals who embrace the new media.

Furthermore, Amitai Etzioni and Alyssa Bowditch (2006: 37) point to the way in which the academy encourages an ‘insularity among scholars’ by creating an environment in which ‘specializ[ing] and publish[ing] in top journals read only by scholars’ is rewarded with tenure. In this way, scholars ‘become more invested in the politics of tenure than in the issues of the people’ (2006: 37). Subjugating the ‘issues of the people’ to the self-interested ‘politics of tenure’ is the antithesis of the public intellectual’s role. However, this is the reality of promotion in the university system – and a reality that the public intellectual in academe must negotiate if they are to be effective. Cultural critic and scholar Henry Giroux (2011) argues that academics ‘produce work that is either too abstract for a generally informed public, or ... separate their scholarship from the myriad issues and contemporary problems that shape everyday life in the United States and abroad’. The public intellectual in academe faces the challenge of producing academic work for a broad public. While this may initially appear to be an oxymoron, it is only the university system failing to acknowledge an
academic’s work in the public sphere that has made academia and the public appear to be mutually exclusive audiences.

The public intellectual’s use of language is key to engaging a public audience, yet the chasm between the specialised language of the academy and the more accessible language of the new media has never been wider. At its worst, the specialised language used in academia is no more than empty words. Much has been written on jargon in the academy over the last few years. Robert S. Boynton (2001) notes that ‘jargon, the cultural theorist’s Achilles heel, [is] the place where the tension between the public and private intellectual is greatest’. Jargon prevents discussion from flourishing outside the academy and celebrates mystification at the expense of lucid prose. When I interviewed Howard Zinn not long before his death, he focused on the way in which pretentious language works against the dissemination of ideas in public. Indeed, he was strident in his belief in the subversiveness of this specialised language for both the academic public intellectual and the private scholar:

I am very impatient with mystification, with pretentious language and a pretty closed circle of people who are the only ones who understand what is being said. One of the important aspects of being a public intellectual is that the public must know what you are saying; must be able to understand what you are saying … It seems the higher up you go, the worse the language gets. A PhD student will write in this manner, and why is that? The student has gotten the message that if you really want to be considered an important academic and a real scholar you must use this kind of language. Of course, to me that is an anathema. Clear, concise communication is the most important thing. (Atherton, 2013: 124)

Zinn’s argument is particularly interesting for his repudiation of mystifying and pretentious language in all environments. He makes no excuses for obscure and unclear communication, even in disciplinary contexts within academia. Boynton supports Zinn’s argument by emphasising the ways in which jargon works to exclude members outside a discipline and posits that some intellectuals are reluctant to abandon it because of its perceived prestige:

So why don’t would-be public intellectuals simply eschew their disciplinary jargon? The reason, as the linguist Walter Nash has argued, is that jargon is not only ‘shop talk,’ but also ‘show talk’ – a means of impressing, sometimes mystifying, the uninitiated. This ‘intelligibility gap’ is the essence of modern professionalism. Without it you’re just a generalist, with it, you’re a specialist, the credibility of whose pronouncements is augmented by your institutional prestige. (Boynton, 2001)

This ‘show talk’ has been described as a version of The Emperor’s New Clothes when it earns false adoration from those too confronted by the abstruseness of the language to question it (Medvetz, 2012: 89). Perhaps what is most pernicious is the way in which jargon is exclusionary – the antithesis of the public intellectual’s role. As Brian Martin (1992: 16) argues, jargon ‘separates’ rather than draws people in and restricts interdisciplinarity, reinforcing segregation:

Jargon serves to police the boundaries of disciplines and specialities. It’s like a toll collected from those who attempt to cross an intellectual border, a toll collected in the currency of intellectual labour. Jargon, on top of credentials, ensures that migration between disciplines is kept to a low level. Jargon serves another purpose too. It separates academic work from the so-called ‘general
public.’ Academics may battle among themselves over knowledge, but they have a common interest in maintaining the status of academic knowledge in the eyes of outsiders. If what academics do is too easy to understand, then it becomes harder to justify comfortable salaries and conditions. (Martin, 1992: 16)

While not all academics can boast ‘comfortable salaries and conditions’, Martin makes a compelling argument that the reason why scholars communicate in opaque and even exclusionary language aimed at university-educated audiences is to protect their intellectually elevated positions and ‘gain power and status’ (1992: 16). This has fuelled arguments by many journalists and critics that ‘the university is unable to facilitate or sustain publicly relevant work’ (Brouwer and Squires, 2006: 31).

In my interview with Stephen Greenblatt (Atherton, 2013: 66), he argued that it is a misperception that complex ideas cannot be expressed in simple terms:

The mistake is to think that you have to sacrifice your intelligence to write clearly because you can actually write very complex things in clear prose. The world is full of people who have done it. This tradition starts with Shakespeare’s own achievement, but extends to many other people.

Many academics whose work is potentially relevant to public debate are guilty of presenting their research in unwieldy language. This is often because they are trying to impress an audience and believe that jargonistic language is evidence of intellectual rigour. Instead, it is the anathema of intelligence; being able to communicate ideas in an accessible manner is more impressive. Alan Hudson (2004: 45) concurs when he argues that, ‘The defence of the willfully obscure is that many ideas are complex and difficult. As Thomas Jefferson realized in his Declaration of Independence, difficult ideas need clear and rigorous language.’

Jargon and public intellectuals of the past

Of all forms of jargon, post-modernist jargon in particular is the public intellectual’s enemy. While similar arguments can be made for jargon in other fields, such as Marxism and feminism, the postmodern turn in university humanities departments has only served to widen the gap between scholars and the general public. French structuralist theorists, in particular Barthes, Derrida and Foucault, were held in high esteem, not only for their theories but also for their writing style. Identified as public intellectuals, their language and prose were considered emblematic of deep intelligence. Scholars and students alike began to ape this language, which Camille Paglia identified as the prose of ‘French scholars writing English as a second language’ (Atherton, 2013: 114). In no other arena would a person who speaks and writes English as their native language abandon this to imitate the writing of a French person writing English in translation. Todd Gitlin wittily described this as ‘theory as a second language’. Indeed, referring to Foucault’s and Barthes’ writing, Noam Chomsky advised me, ‘You should read it in French, it’s much worse’ (Atherton, 2013: 135).

Paglia is strident about scholars’ use of language and reverence for Foucault:

It is an outrage to see these English professors of my generation trot out this language, like Stephen Greenblatt who sees Foucault as a brilliant man ... I mean you would have to have a very empty head to be that fascinated with Foucault. (Atherton, 2013: 80)

This statement is particularly interesting in light of Greenblatt’s statements concerning the importance of ‘clear prose’. Interestingly, if Greenblatt does see Foucault as a ‘brilliant
man’, he doesn’t try to ape his writing style. This is because an accessible style is essential for the communication of the public intellectual’s ideas. Todd Gitlin’s lengthy response to the importance of ‘clarity’ from the initial thought process through to the communication of these ideas to an audience is revelatory. He makes the point that not only do many scholars write in a clunky style, but they are imitating a style that even the French theorists considered performative. As Gitlin had first-hand experience of Foucault as a colleague, his discussion is even more pertinent:

Style is a *sine qua non* of clarity – and not just clarity of communication, but clarity of thought. I knew Foucault when he was at Berkeley. He spent much of his last few years at Berkeley. He was extremely lucid in English. To be a substantial French intellectual, one has to commit a certain level of bullshit. Foucault admitted it and Pierre Bourdieu admitted it. It is quite apparent. These are people who were capable of being extremely and methodically clear and they performed pirouettes and spun arabesques because it was expected of them. They knew the game. It is one thing to spin the pirouettes if it is the stylistic form of one’s moment. (Atherton, 2013: 115)

The possibility that this kind of language was some kind of amusement is particularly cruel for those who have dedicated a lifetime to honing this style and those who believe that using it makes them appear rigorously intelligent. Gitlin refreshingly calls this style of writing ‘bullshit’, and exposes what could be literary theory’s greatest joke:

Those who would emulate Foucault have tried to place themselves in that [stylistic form] but it is rather laughable. Foucault … when he was functioning as a political activist he was not as Delphic, let’s say, as he was in written prose. This is all so interesting and peculiar. I have spent some time in France. Foucault doesn’t have the kind of significance that he does for English speaking people, in France. He is one of many. Derrida, likewise, was not such a formidable figure. There are pleasures in any developed style and as I understand the appeal of the style, I think there also – for personal or public impulse – this is more a trap than a benefit. To style oneself a connoisseur of a style that is artificial in the first place, and then to be artificial at two removes from lucidity is, I think, pathetic and laughable. There is nothing more tedious than somebody straining to produce this kind of thing. (Atherton, 2013: 115)

Their style, as Gitlin identifies, was of their moment. As Chomsky and Paglia, among others, have argued, it is questionable whether it is still relevant in any context. As public intellectuals are very much of their time, their discussions are most effective when they embrace the most up-to-date language to reach the broadest public.

The way in which essays and monographs by French structuralist theorists like Foucault are still held in high esteem at many universities can alienate the student wading through jargonistic terms and poor sentence structure for meaning. For most of the general public, it is impenetrable and confronting, posed to set up boundaries between the academy and contemporary publics. Chomsky takes this further to state that, ‘When you write … in very inflated rhetoric with codicils and pomposity and so on, people take it seriously.’ Furthermore, impenetrable prose mystifies language and encourages elitism in that it requires a university-trained audience to make sense of it. Trying to imitate this style is, as Gitlin puts it, ‘a trap’. Chomsky concurs when he points out the danger of allowing postmodernism to suppress the intellectual in the academy:
Postmodernism is a very useful invention to keep intellectuals in their preferred status of conformist subservients to those in power. It is mostly unintelligible gibberish. I look at it, but mostly out of curiosity. It falls into two categories as far as I can see: unintelligible and truisms. The truisms are said in very inflated rhetoric, polysyllables and so on. What it turns out to be, is a way for intellectuals to be more radical than thou, but do nothing except talk to each other in academic seminars and not get involved with the general public in real activism. That is very attractive, it is a lot of fun to sit around having conversations with one another as Richard Rorty put it, and it is really wonderful to want to get involved in the nitty gritty of organizing workers or illegal immigrants. But it is a cocoon, almost impenetrable, impossible to understand what they are talking about. (Atherton, 2013: 135)

More subversively, Chomsky’s argument is that this kind of language actually keeps intellectuals subservient to those in power. While the possibilities of working with like-minded scholars and belonging to an intellectual environment are useful for the intellectual and public intellectual, Chomsky points out that these should not be at the expense of becoming ‘cocooned’ in the academy and losing sight of real-world issues. Being ensconced in the university and communicating only with other scholars in jargon encourages a form of elitism that excludes public engagement and prevents ‘real activism’.

The academic public intellectual and the language of the new media

Public intellectuals can no longer rely on traditional outputs to express their views. Journal articles and books, which have been the academic public intellectual’s preferred form of publication, can take more than a year to publish and by the time they reach any kind of public, they are often outdated. When they publish in the traditional media, academic public intellectuals most commonly write op-eds, which often rely on an invitation from an editorial board (Furman, 2013). For this reason, the reaction time for commentary on contemporary issues is slowed while this is negotiated, accepted and published. In addition to this, as printed newspapers are only published once a day, they do not have the immediacy of news on the internet, which has a much shorter news cycle. In short, it is difficult to produce up-to-the-minute views and commentary without interacting with the new media.

As public intellectual blogger Daniel Drezner argues, ‘The explosion of online publications, podcasts, dialogues, and especially weblogs has enabled academic public intellectuals to express their ideas beyond the narrow confines of elite op-ed pages and network television’ (Drezner, 2008). While engaging with wider publics includes the platforms of social media, YouTube and TED talks, this article focuses specifically on the importance of blogs in a computer-literate public sphere. One of the most useful features of the weblog is that it allows the public to comment almost immediately on what is being posted. Just as the scholar often has a long wait for publication in traditional publications, so too does the public have to wait to respond via a letter to the editor, or a response to an academic article in a journal. Blogs allow for the possibility of a dialogue between the blogger and the public in a series of instant interchanges. Furthermore, blogging is ‘conversational scholarship which makes scholarly work accessible and accountable to a readership outside the academy’ (Kirkup, 2010: 4). It is inclusionary rather than exclusionary, and allows the academic public intellectual’s ideas to be critiqued by those outside their specialist area. As Drezner articulates:
The growth of the blogosphere breaks down or at least lowers the barriers erected by a professionalized academy. They also provide a vetting mechanism through which public intellectuals can receive feedback and therefore fulfill their roles more effectively. (Drezner, 2008)

In short, blogs and articles published on the internet make the public intellectual more accessible to the public – as a ‘public’ intellectual indeed should be. The challenge for academic public intellectuals, then, is to be active in the new media and to acquire skills to become proficient in this area.

Douglas Kellner argues:

The critical public intellectual who wants to intervene in the new public spheres of the emerging high-tech society has to master the use of new media and the technologies to be an effective democratic citizen who participates in some of the key debates and discussions currently going on. The public intellectual of the present must thus learn how to use computers, video equipment, mobile devices, and other technologies in order to communicate with a broad public and assume the role of critical intellectual in promoting democracy and progressive social change. (Kellner, 2014: 37)

However, an impediment to academics taking up blogging is that it is not yet recognised as an academic product, and therefore, ‘For most academics, blogs are irrelevant because they don’t count as publications’ (Lovink, 2008: 4). However, writing op-eds and appearing on television and other forms of traditional media have never been considered scholarly activity in academia. This interaction is considered significant in the way in which it can establish an academic as a public intellectual. It builds the academic public intellectual’s profile and reputation beyond the confines of the ivory tower. Gill Kirkup discusses how blogging can similarly build the profile and reputation of the scholar. He argues that the internet is where ‘scholarly identity’ can be created and practised:

Academic blogging is becoming a particular form of academic writing; a genre through which academics perform their scholarly identity, engage in knowledge production, and become public intellectuals, at least on the internet. (Kirkup, 2010: 83)

Camille Paglia stated that as a public intellectual she has always understood the importance of the online audience. She uses her writing for Salon.com from its first issue in 1995 as evidence of her commitment to the new media. In my interview with her, Paglia stated:

The world listens to media, young people listen to the media. It used to be an American phenomenon but now we see it everywhere. I am committed to the web … No one wants to go to the library anymore. You can get the information on the web, but the act of acquiring the information and the networking connections of information are very different. There is too much competition, too much going on – video game culture (especially for young men in America), movies, TV, iPods, the web. The web is a major transformation – people are reading but a different kind of reading … There are so many things kids want to be doing and the web is an enormous part of that. To try and get them to the library and open a book – why should they, when they are used to being online all night? Why would they go to the library when they could do this online?
Her point about reading is pertinent. We know from studies that longer blogs get fewer readers and fewer links from other bloggers (Ewer, 2015). In addition to this, concise responses and frequent postings attract more followers than longer blogs posted less frequently. Most importantly, blogging also requires jargon-free prose to attract a widespread public. As Paglia notes, ‘there is too much competition’, which means that blogs deemed too long, unwieldy or written in impenetrable language by a reader will most often be abandoned for a shorter blog written in accessible language. The new media require the public intellectual to communicate in a common language to reach a broad audience. Therefore, the academic public intellectual needs to embrace an accessible style of writing to remain relevant, which is an important turn from the belief that difficult ideas require complex language (McLemee, 2007).

The new media is democratising in the way that it does not require an invitation or an academic pedigree to publish online. However, Russell Jacoby points out that without any kind of gatekeeper for blogs on personal websites, there is no one to check the authenticity or quality of writing online. This, in turn, encourages more people to try their hand at publishing on the internet and results in too many competing narratives that are not hierarchised in any way. He suggests that the reader, if there are indeed any readers left, has no way of initially differentiating between the informed blogs and the dross; they are all just competing narratives:

The internet has altered cultural realities. Writers – including professors – can escape censorious educators and referees by establishing their own blogs. The Internet gives anyone an electronic pulpit. All ideas are game … In the United States, blogs … add to the cacophony. Blogs may be more like private journals with megaphones than reasoned contributions to public life … We face a revolt of the writers. Today everyone is a writer or blogger but where are the readers? On the Internet, articles, blog posts, and comments on blog posts out forth but who can keep up with them?\footnote{Jeremy Freese (2008) takes Jacoby’s argument a step further by suggesting that the democratising features of blogging encourage writers to believe they are, or can be, public intellectuals when many of them are not:}

Blogs provide the most disruptive technology since television for conducting the commerce of commentary that brings public intellectuals into being. Most importantly, blogs have radically expanded the number of people who may regard themselves as plausible aspirants to the status of public intellectual. Before one needed to get on television or on the radio or in to a newspaper or in with to achieve attention beyond the reach of one’s voice from a soapbox. Now, within minutes and without expense, an opinion entrepreneur can freely broadcast to anyone with Internet access. (2008: 46)

Obviously not everyone who writes a blog is a public intellectual, just as it is certainly not the case that everyone who writes an article is an academic. Freese’s ‘opinion entrepreneurs’ are not public intellectuals, but they compete for a reader’s time online. And if Jacoby is correct, and if more people think of themselves as writers rather than readers, it changes the dynamic of the conversations taking place online. Indeed, a study by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics in February 2014 found that there were more people creating online content than reading it (‘Study: Online Content’, 2014).

Despite this, the importance of blogs in an increasingly computer-literate public sphere cannot be under-estimated. Finding a good blog, such as Daniel Drezner’s or
Michael Bérubé’s, is an exciting and interactive experience. If blogs allow the public to comment, readers can respond almost immediately to what is being posted and often receive a response from the public intellectual, writer or another reader. In this way, the public intellectual’s blog is a dialogue between them and the public, and a way to receive instant feedback from an active readership. Indeed, Drezner (2008: 52) makes the point that, ‘Because the mainstream media responds to cues from the blogosphere, a well-timed post or exchange can have a pronounced effect on public discourse’. However, Henry Giroux (2010) argues that, ‘while the new media … produces new and useful modes of interaction and exchange … that is only part of the story’. He points out that the internet can encourage ‘withdrawal from complexity and social reality’. This complicates the relationship between the online public and the public intellectual.

Conclusion

Currently, given growing online public discussion, some form of online identity is needed to support the academic public intellectual’s status. However, a public intellectual cannot make a name by blogging alone. Or at least we have not got to the point where we have seen a public intellectual develop solely from their online contributions. As Drezner argues, ‘It is hard to think of an example of a public intellectual who built her or his reputation solely in the Internet. However, it seems likely that some public intellectuals who rarely get mass media exposure get a better chance on the Internet’ (Drezner, 2008: 122). While the internet is democratising, it also doesn’t discriminate between voices – and there are a lot of voices on the internet. The public needs to know who to look for online and make decisions about who to follow, read and/or respond to. This requires the public intellectual to be identifiable and searchable prior to someone going online, which means that the public intellectual is still reliant upon making a name via traditional forms of media and scholarship.

References


‘Study: Online Content Creators Outnumber Consumers 2,000 To 1, 2014’, *The Onion*, www.theonion.com/articles/study-online-content-creators-outnumber-consumers,35380.


Cassandra Atherton is a Senior Lecturer in Literary Studies/Professional and Creative Writing in the School of Communications and Creative Arts, Deakin University. She is one of Australia’s leading experts on American public intellectuals in academe. She will take up a Harvard Visiting Scholar’s position in 2015-16.