the changing profession

In the Context of Infinite Contexts

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AROUND THE TIME I REALIZED THAT I WOULD BE SPENDING THE BETTER PART OF MY TWENTIES IN GRADUATE SCHOOL, I SAW AN EPISODE OF *The Simpsons* that had an embarrassingly profound effect on me. The episode's conceit was alluringly simple: What would happen if the city of Springfield was entrusted to its smartest citizens rather than to politicians or bureaucrats? Or, in the blunt diagnosis of Julius Hibbert, a Springfield physician (and one of the city's smartest citizens), "Why do we live in a town where the smartest have no power and the stupidest run everything?" Why couldn't things be different?

The Springfield experiment begins when the precocious know-it-all Lisa Simpson, fresh from decrying her hometown's anti-intellectualism in the local newspaper, receives an invitation to join the local chapter of Mensa. Its members discuss current events, debate big ideas, make plans for a better future: finally, she has found her people. But the possibility of effecting change remains dim until one day when the mayor, fearful that this brainiac cabal might expose his latest misdeeds, skips town. In the mayor's absence, the Springfield charter places governance in the hands of the city's smartest citizens. The Mensa members—Lisa, a TV executive, a doctor, a professor, a principal, and "Comic Book Guy"—enact their vision of a blissful, efficient society. Nevertheless, an angry public descends on them, demanding a return to the bad old ways because innovation entails a mild, temporary inconvenience. "Let's make litter of these literati," a man from the lumpen mob calls, causing the crowd to turn on him for making "too clever" a comment.

For me this episode perfectly captured a set of challenges I hoped to think through while in graduate school. On one hand, *The Simpsons* was poking fun at the conservatism of the middlebrow—an easy target, to be sure. But, on the other hand, the episode stopped short of blaming the masses for failing to recognize the wisdom of their supposed betters. If anything, it made light of Lisa and her posse's self-importance. Despite their fine ideas and good intentions, Springfield's new overlords went about their work on behalf of a citizenry

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that remained, at best, abstract and distant. Instead of engaging the public and proving themselves deserving of its attention and trust, they were guided by their own convictions and theories, a sense that they knew better. Not that the dark arts of persuasion would have ultimately made a difference in the static reality of *The Simpsons*. But the fact that Springfield's brain trust never worried about questions of audience or reception stayed with me, for these were concerns that literally kept me up at night. Shortly before starting graduate school, I had begun working as a freelance music journalist, partly as a plan B should the academic thing not work out but mostly out of a desire to amass free CDs. I continued chasing this alternative career in graduate school during the wee hours, rarely directing my journalism toward subjects I would study in my classes. To me the thrill of journalism was in its brief, stressful, concentrated cycles of critical scrutiny. You mastered a subject as best you could and then moved on a few weeks later, entering another alien world. In contrast, the academy was a site where curiosities marinated and flourished through patient, sustained inquiry, where we were beholden to the limits of our creativity rather than to the whims of editors or newsstand competitors. While pursuing my PhD, I often hid my moonlit side hustle from my professors, not because my program was unusually hostile to my freelance activities but because they did not seem to matter much. We were being trained to replace our mentors, and anything short of that aspiration seemed lacking. Perhaps we would be lucky enough to one day become something called a public intellectual. (Few PhD students at the time aspired to become journalists.)

But what did it mean to be a public intellectual? How could one aspire to this tantalizingly vague mandate? Was the public intellectual's task to translate heavy ideas into accessible language? To shape public opinion? Was it about offering educated takes on the day's events or evangelizing on behalf of specialized knowledge? Was it work motivated by conviction rather than part of a daily grind? (Maybe this was why the life of the public intellectual seemed more appealing to most people than the vocation of journalism.) The public intellectual was an idea that only made sense in the best-case scenarios: Edward Said, Susan Sontag, Stuart Hall, bell hooks, thinkers of a certain stature who could address multiple audiences. (The question then came into clearer focus: how to become Edward Said?) In books and articles, the idea of the public intellectual was invoked only to question where that figure had gone, to root around for reasons the category no longer existed, to lament the passing of some bygone golden age of thought, expression, and influence.

I still wonder why the mythic vocation of the public intellectual continues to hold sway and whether this is a good thing. What does it mean today, in the age of social networks, when journalism has begun to deprofessionalize? How has the scope of the public and the means to reach readers changed since, say, January 2014 (when this collection of articles was conceived)? And should any of this affect the way we define and evaluate academic scholarship? At least Springfield had city limits. How does one address a public that is constantly shape-shifting, expanding, an infinite terrain overrun with opinion? Does any audience beyond one's academic niche qualify as a general readership? At a time when any citizen of the digital world can offer a hot take on the news, what makes our contributions special? As a magazine editor friend of mine wondered, mostly seriously, Is Russell Brand a public intellectual? Are think tank researchers and cable news analysts public intellectuals?

Perhaps talking about public intellectuals remains useful, then, to the extent that it marks the aspirations, anxieties, and possibilities of a given moment, indexing how different generations have conceptualized

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the aims and audiences of our work. A scan of the term's recent history suggests as much. While a disparate range of thinkers and writers throughout time have idealized some version of engaged thought, the tendency to refer to such work as public intellectualism did not surface until Russell Jacoby's 1987 book *The Last Intellectuals*. Published at the dawn of what would become known as the culture wars, Jacoby's book is an absorbing artifact. His hunt for modern-day heirs to Irving Howe or Lewis Mumford ends up being a history less of intellectual engagement than of all that enables it: cheap, stable rents, a lively bohemian subculture, a flourishing network of magazines and journals. As American cities changed, the possibilities for this kind of passionate engagement were winnowed. Perhaps it was inevitable, Jacoby laments, that the once free-ranging, maverick public intellectual would be absorbed into the dull rhythms of academia.

By the time Richard Posner took on the subject in 2001, the public intellectual's position in the university was a foregone conclusion. The question for Posner was how to keep the professoriat accountable. Irked by the political activism and punditry of the 1990s—especially the liberal defense of the Clinton presidency—he sought to understand what influence might mean in concrete terms. His study, which involved counting the bylines and references of over five hundred public scholars and thinkers, ended on a bizarre prescriptive note. In the absence of scholarly peer review, he hoped to establish a new system of public credibility: "one solution might be for universities to require their faculty members to post annually, on the university's Web page, all the nonacademic writing, in whatever form or medium published, and public speaking that they have done during the preceding year, other than books, articles, and other readily accessible work, which would only have to be cited" (390). Perhaps something called the *Journal of Retractions* could be produced, Posner offered, and the predictions and claims of public intellectuals could be "periodically reviewed" and, presumably, ridiculed (396). The effect of all this would be to deter "irresponsible interventions by academics in public controversies" (390). Both Jacoby and Posner were ultimately concerned with contexts: the social and economic forces that shaped public intellectuals but also the potential blast radius of their work.

There are two ways of approaching the present-day versions of these contexts more critically: by seeing them as variations on the same concerns over engagement and impact that have vexed thinkers for decades or as a wholly unprecedented set of possibilities brought about by new forms of technology and networking. We continue to chase an ideal of public intellectual work even as these operative terms shift beneath our feet. Where is the public? Perhaps most pressing for those already in the profession: what qualifies as work?

From our perspective today, there is something quaint about the limited reach of the pre-Internet era. There used to be few portable containers for the circulation of ideas: books, magazine articles, and maybe speeches and television appearances. One had to be willing and bold to enter into the public. By contrast, consider the conversations that took place in the months leading up to the writing of this essay. The *New York Times* published Nicholas Kristof's "Professors, We Need You!," a widely circulated op-ed lampooning the academy's supposed insularity. Every week seemed to bring new articles ruing the rising cost of education, the awful state of adjunct labor, and the overall "crisis of the humanities." (Related themes: "Why go to college?" and "What's up with these weird dissertations?") The University of Illinois rescinded a contract offer to a scholar after concerns were raised over his brash *Twitter* feed—his greatest sin seems to have been violation of the unspoken code of "civility." One no longer needs to court the public to wind

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up there. In fact, the Internet functions as its own *Journal of Retractions*, albeit one where the stakes are fifteen-minute micro cycles of fame and infamy. At the same time, this is a moment when the basic display of intelligence is prized in new and unique ways. Despite the populist anti-intellectualism on display every election cycle, the Internet is rich with people doing intellectual things in public. This is a golden age for niche online publications, from quasi-academic journals like *Jacobin* and the *New Inquiry* to massive, Disney-backed Web sites introducing cultural criticism or statistical forecasting to millions of unsuspecting readers. Thousands of think pieces bloom to meet each new crisis or controversy. There are the successful TED talks, circulating new ideas far and wide; the cults that have formed around *Freakonomics*, Malcolm Gladwell, and Nate Silver; and the mainstreaming of "nerd culture." Some might argue that my last few examples are markers of how intellectually lazy we have become. But if analysts and orators are our new pop stars, is that such a bad thing? Elsewhere online activists have introduced concepts like antiblackness and intersectionality to public debates over race and power. Platforms like *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *Goodreads* allow us to instantly share what we read and think about with thousands of friends and strangers. Every day millions of people online model intellectual engagement and critical scrutiny for all to see.

Of course, people on the Internet can be infuriating, small-minded, and provincial. It is a world that traffics in extremes, from cuteness overloads to the most desperately violent forms of speech, a world where everything is either the best or the worst. On a more structural level, many critics have written about how the culture around new technology has fostered an overconfidence in "solutionism." But my point is that our sites of intellectual endeavor have shifted. In the 1960s it became conceivable that the next Great American Novel could be not a novel but a record album, a collage, or a silkscreen. Maybe the basic acts and aims of public intellectual work have been absorbed into the Internet. Maybe the next great public intellectual will produce a majestic piece of code or publish only on *Tumblr*.

To aspire to public intellectual work is to covet the possibility of influence—of having a voice. For those in the academy, that possibility can appear tantalizingly out of reach. After all, many of us were drawn to the academy because someone at some point in our lives told us we were smart—that we had something to say. A minor driver for many careers has been this desire to someday find an audience. The pleasures and extended-release rewards of teaching notwithstanding, for many people the possibility of entering the fray seems to dim with each passing year. The standard order of things, we are told, is to prove ourselves as rigorous specialists before participating in the general conversation that is forever elsewhere.

But academic credentials have never meant so little in that public elsewhere. The Internet has given everyone the possibility of influence. Nowadays nothing is truly obscure; what is not known is merely not yet viral. At a time when "power reviewers" on *Amazon* wield clout comparable with that of, say, the *New York Times Book Review*—and neither of them, it should be noted, can dent the influence of a celebrity reader like Oprah Winfrey—we must rethink the value of our expertise. What does it mean to devote oneself to expertise when mocking antielitism rules the day?

In many ways, this asymmetry of relations, which makes online social networks so exciting for the average user, is at odds with a system built on peer review, hierarchy, and the promise of meritocracy. There are many good reasons to rethink the metrics and standards that undergird our profession, from evolving sites of scholarship to conserving paper. Perhaps we should rethink peer review or consider how new developments in citation

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analysis can be used to evaluate a scholar's influence. Maybe we can conceptualize a career in terms of projects that take on various forms and styles in addition to monographs and articles. We should not discourage young scholars from introducing their work to a broader audience. We cannot regard writing that is plainspoken or journalistic with suspicion.

All that said, there is something valuable about the academy's fustiness, not because it serves academia's bogus meritocracy but because it encourages the preservation of what makes scholarship a faintly utopian enterprise. We develop our ideas according to alternative timelines, beholden to no special interest, and that space should be preserved, for fewer such spaces will exist in tomorrow's economy. When we meet accusations that the humanities are useless by pointing to our brashest, loudest, quickest forays into the public square, we always come up short. Those arguments are unwinnable, for they presume that influence means sudden, viral impact.

The luxury of academic work is that it can resist this market pressure to make all knowledge instantly usable. The problem in our profession is that writing well in the course of this resistance is often disparaged as pandering and surrendering to a populace that merely wants to be entertained. Clarity and accessibility are not pandering. Editing, thinking about structure and length, and revisiting our reliance on jargon and shorthand: these are not forms of surrender. Understanding one's audience and critiquing "neoliberalism" without using the word are not forms of retrenchment. Understanding how journalism and the media work does not tarnish our profession. On the other hand, posting something on *Facebook* is not journalism.

In the academy, we might say, for example, that scholars' influence is measured by how little of their work you have to explain when you drop their names. In the world of journalism and punditry, the skill is in those explanations—swift, efficient sentences that introduce Theodor Adorno or Walter Benjamin, or "racial triangulation" or "privilege," to a substantial portion of the readers. Just as a good teacher builds a case with patience and clarity, we must approach writing as a puzzle and a craft. Just as a skilled translator frets over the meaning and placement of each word, we must imagine what our sentences sound like to strangers. Academics have many useful contributions to make to all sorts of contemporary debates: the tyranny of "civility" and "relatability"; issues around entitlement, privilege, and inequality; and structures of bias and exploitation. We are not entitled to these forums, and we should not expect to enter them purely on our terms. Having strong ideas and a grasp of others' ideas yields little unless one has, in Jacoby's words, "mastered a public prose" (26). Instead, it sometimes seems as though many shout to be heard, wondering why nobody rises to carry the difficult words issuing from their mouths.

This isn't an argument for journalism. Over the past decade, I have published reportage and criticism in the *New Yorker*, the *Atlantic*, *Artforum*, *Slate*, the *Village Voice*, and *Grantland*. Some of the most challenging and intimate collaborations of my professional life have come during the editorial process: fighting with an editor to keep a showy adjective, reading a draft aloud together as we figure out how to trim a thousand words by two hundred. These experiences have helped me in the classroom, particularly when I work with students on their writing. It has also made me somewhat sensitive to the uncritical chastisement of the media that one often hears on college campuses. But having a foot in each profession has probably immunized me from idealizing either one. Both journalism and academia operate according to systems of prestige and cultural capital; they are merely calibrated differently. An editor once told me that he liked ideas that were "big and impossible to prove." He wanted his writers to

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provoke and irritate the status quo, to write stories that would spur conversation and debate. It was a thrilling mandate but one that aspired to freeze each story in a given moment. (A more extreme version of this might be the shoddy, sensationalistic journalism that simply trolls for readers.)

Journalism assumes a commitment to a public language and public interests. It is a mode of clear, precise writing that is deceptively difficult to master. Journalism, as Norman Mailer once wrote, "is chores." It is important, then, to ask whether we have done enough to deserve dessert. Academics can learn a great deal from how journalists pursue their subjects, entering the world and reckoning with it as it is. The lines of accountability are more direct. It can be an uncomfortable thing, cold-calling strangers so as to report their private tragedies. At a time when America grows more splintered by the day—when technology allows us to occupy customized silos and we nurse the most polemical version of ourselves online—this basic contact is important.

I am reminded of Richard Sennett's pessimistic description of our shrinking public sphere: "Each person's self has become his principal burden; to know oneself has become an end, instead of a means through which one knows the world" (4). At its best, academia refuses this kind of solipsism, for our work is rarely allowed to be so obviously introspective; it is always about "the world" and for "the world." Yet we must reckon with this scene. As the tired narratives of Jacoby, Posner, and others go, we lost all our great free-range thinkers to the university. Now, as the ranks of professional journalists shrink and the university is under increasing scrutiny, the illusive figure of the public intellectual resurfaces. We should refuse the nostalgia tied up in this mythic figure. We must leave behind the old language and precepts and build new relations with the public. This time we might ask different questions. We used to wonder, Where are the young? Where is the next generation, trained in our image? Where have all the thinkers gone? Today we might ask, What is it like to be young? What do the young know?

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