

Blogs and the Attention Market for Public Intellectuals

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Abstract Public intellectuals are successful suppliers of commentary in the attention market for serious thought. Blogs are a relatively new technology that substantially alters this market. More people can now nurse aspirations to be public intellectuals, but blogs also make plain the difficulties of actually reaching a public in ways that books do not. Blogs also vitiate other romantic ideas about the public intellectual as transcendent figure. Even so, blogs may well provide the services for which transcendent public intellectuals are often lauded better than these figures ever did.

Keywords Blogs · Internet · Public intellectuals · Public sphere · Attention markets

The psychiatrist George Ainslie once said that “the ultimate scarce resource in life is the willingness of other people to pay attention to us.” Many speculate about a basic human need for attention, but whatever the truth of that, it is undeniable that many people *really like* attention and strongly desire more of it. Besides being rewarding in itself, attention creates opportunities to influence impressions in ways that can be leveraged for financial and other rewards.

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Even entirely altruistic people who believe they know how to better humanity will be strongly motivated to secure attention, so they can share their enlightenment with others. Yet, while the per capita wealth of a society can expand indefinitely, the per capita attention paid to members of that society is relatively fixed. Our capacity to provide attention is sharply limited, and we have other demands on our times than paying attention to others. Put all this together, and many people want far more attention than what they get.

A public intellectual is a supplier in an attention market for a particular kind of symbolic good: intelligent commentary on social and cultural issues of common concern. One does not become a public intellectual just by offering commentary, but instead that commentary needs to *actually succeed* in gaining attention from others—especially, unless we go for a very intimate sense of “public,” attention from strangers. A public intellectual is a social accomplishment, arising from repeated transactions between those who provide commentary and those who pay attention.

The number of public intellectuals is far more limited by demand than supply. Opinions are freely and spontaneously generated and many people want an audience for their views. Reasoned or entertaining commentary certainly requires effort, and the work that aspiring public intellectuals put into their arguments partly reveals the strong competition to supply opinion in a buyer’s market.

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 commentary to anyone with Internet access.

People could have responded to the invention of blogs by deciding that there was already enough superior-quality public debate that they personally had nothing to add. Indeed, only a small percentage of Americans have taken up blogging and most bloggers do not write regularly about weighty public issues. Even so, enough bloggers have entered the attention market for commentary that we are awash in a far greater amount of public thought than ever before. When the entry costs to having one's views publicly available are nearly eliminated, many people want readers. So many, in fact, that it becomes hard to take seriously the argument of those who cast the public intellectual as species endangered by a lack of smart people trying.

If public intellectuals arise from transactions in the market for a particular kind of attention, how have blogs influenced the relative power between producer and consumer? Public intellectuals have never had much power to *command* attention beyond captive audience settings like classrooms, public meetings, and conference panels. Blogs give individuals far more power in making ideas available, but having thoughts available to the public is not the same as having them *read*. In this respect, intellectuals who articulate ideas on blogs might find blogs harsher on their self-regard than more time-honored forums. Libraries allow book authors to imagine they have been read by more people than the number of copies sold. Books sustain notions that one's thoughts will be read years into the future—indeed, that perhaps the ideas will only be recognized for their true worth many years hence. Books nurture authors' beliefs that long, dense-written arguments in middle chapters have actually been read. Books' comparatively long gestation allows extended nursing of grand expectations about what their public reception will be.

There are analogues in blogging; namely, for blogs that have many page views, authors may come to vastly underestimate the extent to which longer posts are read instead of skimmed. With blogs that have practically no page views, however, authors have little recourse but to conclude that they have no public. Moreover, blogs do not seem to succor the notion that an unread post might be uncovered by a learned Googler years from now.

The harsh light that blogging throws upon the size of one's audience—"Am I really a public intellectual if I only have five readers?"—may keep academics out of serious blogging as much as the more commonly cited concerns about career damage or time taken from meatier projects. Many academics by now have stuck a toe into blogging and retreated. Such retreats may reflect less a lack of interest in speaking to a public than a realization of how hard it is to get one. Some academic public intellectuals who have started blogs have been striking for how profoundly they

have failed to achieve any kind of discernible regular audience. The now-familiar blog death spiral goes from lack of audience reaction to lowered author enthusiasm to less frequent posting to loss of remaining readers to abandonment.

In writing this essay, I became curious about a blog that I had not checked out in awhile, a blog sponsored by a foundation with the aspiration of bringing a high-minded discussions by academics to the broader public. The blog signed up 75 different academics to post. But in the 2 months prior to my visit, these 75 academics had together produced only 26 posts, and those 26 posts had received only 27 comments, with most not receiving any. (Incidentally, perhaps a telling feature of many blogs that assemble academics is that the authors expect attention to their posts while seeming not to read one another.)

Because of the severe competition for reader attention and the stark indicators when a blogger has none, audiences have greater power over the blogs of intellectuals than the intellectuals wish to acknowledge. Simplest here is just the strong incentive to be concise. Unlike newspaper columnists, blog authors do not work under imposed word limits. Yet bloggers quickly learn that, *ceteris paribus*, longer posts get fewer readers and fewer links from other bloggers. Successful "prolific" bloggers are prolific less in the length of their posts than their sheer number, as providing brief commentary on a large number of different topics increases the chance that readers will see at least one thing each visit that they find worth attending to. For those who see public intellectuals as vital sources of "nuance," the incentives to concision in blogging are troubling. Again, however, one wonders how often authors of books overestimate the extent to which their more verbose arguments are actually read.

Some take the public's strong preference for concision as underscoring its fundamental superficiality. Ever since television, the argument goes, attention spans have been shrinking, to where now people are unable to appreciate complex arguments the way they could in days gone by. But if public intellectuals exist in an attention market, then long arguments impose an opportunity cost. Sure, some authors may well believe their ideas deserve 25% of others' overall reading budget, but that belief implies the author is providing a very high marginal intellectual return, in a market that includes hundreds of smart alternatives who have been selected up the blogging ranks partly because of gifts for clarity and concision.

Blogs are highly unusual among leisure-time activities in that readership is highest during conventional working hours. Blogs owe much of their popularity to the rise of a workforce engaged in jobs that involve many hours of unsupervised, anomic isolation in front of a computer. In part, blogs feed an enormous craving for distraction that

many members of the American reading public have. In that context, one can understand the position that blogs provide a kind of intellectual confection that is not comparable to a weekend spent working through a detailed argument by a single author. Then again, the idea of a “blogger” as a discrete intellectual kind is already outdated, as the most successful authors of blogs have shown a keen interest in becoming multiveneue intellectuals who also write magazine articles and books.

Blogs reveal that consumers in the public intellectual market have strong interest in being objects of attention themselves. The recurring mistake of the academic who tries intellectual blogging has been to believe the public is eager to sit at their feet and lap up the author’s “take” on issues. Instead readers seem more interested in connection, conversation and community. Even readers who do not comment on blog posts themselves still often prefer blogs as much for their lively comments as for the lively mind authoring posts. Advice for sustaining blog readers might just as well scrawl “It’s not all about you” on a blogger’s monitor: respond to comments, comments sometimes on the blogs of those who comment on yours, link frequently to others. Public intellectuals may have always been regarded as parties to a larger “conversation,” but intellectual blogging is a conversation in one gets a shorter turn and is expected to share the microphone more.

Blog authors are also more immediately confronted by the reality that consumers in the market for commentary are not predominantly motivated by a desire to inform themselves of the range of intelligent opinion on an issue. Instead, all indications are that readers dominantly seek out commentary that gives voice to their preconceptions. Many blogs facilitate the search for comfortable commentary by providing a convenient self-categorization at the top (“commentary on political events from a politically left perspective,” “the personal weblog of a libertarian/conservative...”). Despite this being an age that celebrates diversity, group intellectual blogs typically bring together authors with very similar orientations. Some blogs put the author’s name in relatively small letters at the bottom of the post, and one can read without noticing which of a mostly ideologically interchangeable set of authors happened to write a particular post.

For these reasons, blogs have prompted worry about whether they increase the extent to which individuals are exposed only to commentary that reinforces their opinions (called “information cocooning” in Cass Sunstein’s *Infotopia*). With newspapers, one might find oneself reading a columnist of opposite views just because it was what was on one’s doorstep. With blogs, a liberal or conservative interested only in the commentary of the like-minded can spend every waking hour reading and still never have to visit the site of someone on the other side.

No one has studied the effect of audiences on the stances bloggers take. Blog archives allow one to read the opinions of some bloggers back before they had the audiences they presently do, and a story of audience-author co-evolution is easily sketched. An intellectually engaged person of moderate views begins blogging about political issues. Mostly, they get no response, but the response they do get accrues disproportionately to posts that either provide especially clear representations of a perspective or offer unusually provocative arguments. Links from major blogs to small blogs can bring in a hundred times more readers than an author usually gets. Links from major blogs to small blogs overwhelmingly support the political orientation of the major blog (that is, major bloggers argue with one another and draw on obscure blogs for support). If attention is rewarding, incentives for blog authors to provide more commentary in line with what generates reaction is plain. Blog authors may thus increase attention by focusing only on a subset of their opinion or expressing especially extreme versions of their opinion. In other words, engaged intellectuals often enter the blogosphere with an eye toward shaping the opinion of an audience, but that audience may more strongly influence the intellectual by what they reward with attention.

Unknown also is the effect of blogging on the political opinions of those who blog. If the public stances of bloggers are influenced by their audience, then plausibly their private stances are as well. Add to this that blogging helps forge communities around ideological homogeneity, which may raise the implicit social costs to changing one’s mind. Blogging may also increase the extent to which bloggers conceive of themselves as a “personal brand,” and their conception of that brand may act like a schema in the evaluation of new political information. In all, a major consequence of the greatly expanded exchange of ideas afforded by blogging may be even more unlikely prospects for anyone ever much changing their mind, except perhaps toward more extreme views.

Blogs provide enormous opportunity for intellectual public discussion, but, by expanding opportunity, blogs vitiate certain romances about the public intellectual. Discussions of the decline of the public intellectual seem to pine for a certain kind of figure: the incandescent intellect who seems to know everything about everything and who expresses those views with self-assurance and towering erudition—the singular mind and moral sense that someone writing decades later can name and lament, “Where is the X of today?” (Perhaps when Paul Simon sang “Where have you gone Joe DiMaggio?” he really should have been asking about Lionel Trilling.) My belief is that such complaints do rightly identify a lost type of person, and this type will recede even further because of blogs.

More specifically, my conjecture is that there is no shortage of people who would very much like to occupy a cultural niche as vaulted as, for example, what C. Wright Mills extolled as “the moral conscience of our society”. But changes wrought by the Internet make achieving such a singular identity far more difficult today than it once was, for several reasons. First, by lowering costs of entry, the Internet has simply expanded the number of smart people circulating in the public consciousness, making it harder for any specific individual to transcend it. Second, some of the abilities that may allow the public intellectual to quickly display their distinguished mind on any topic, like being able to insert copious references to highbrow literature, have lost some signaling capacity in an age of Google. Third, blogs provide space for parody and jeering in the face of intellectual affectation, in ways that expose some of the devices of the otherwise rhetorically formidable. Fourth, blogs provide an unprecedentedly effective medium for exposing instances of intellectual overreach; they provide a rapid means for irritated specialists to explain that some generalist does not know as much as he claims.

Achieving the status of epochal public intellectual involves enchanting an audience to regard the intellectual in venerated terms and memorialize them thusly. Instead, blogs humanize intellectuals in the minds of their publics, providing a fuller view behind the curtain of elite intellectual life. One can readily posit positive consequences of a greater intimacy of authors and readers, but it may well make broad, enduring enchantment harder for any single author to pull off.

Even more than this, however, blogs may challenge the aspiration of the epochal public intellectual by counterposing to it a different model—that of a network of individuals developing positions through mutually reinforcing links. Blogs are distinct from their predecessors for the pervasiveness of quotation and the extent to which authors keep your attention by continually directing it elsewhere. If one thinks in terms of the services that public intellectuals contribute—new ideas, means of making sense of the events of our times, moral conscience—than the important question is whether the new model of decentralized collaboration provides these services better than a model in which a few erudite individuals are identified as the souls of the age. Without good evidence to the contrary, the enormous amount of original commentary that surrounds us makes it reasonable to suppose that we now live in great times for public thought, even as we have less sense that we can hoist up specific individuals as our moral and cognitive heroes. The fate of the standout public intellectual is ultimately far less important than the status of the intellectual life of the public.

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