

Introduction: The Time of the Semipublic Intellectual

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“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” THIS IS A QUESTION FAMILIAR TO ACADEMICS WHO HAVE SPENT TIME AWAY FROM THEIR OFFICIAL SCHOLARLY PURSUITS to write online. Whether it’s a blog post on research, a review essay about contemporary fiction, or even a tweet about a passionate political belief, this question of doing stalks every piece of writing we send into that expanding liminal space between scholarly and popular audiences. Is what you are doing scholarship, or are you moonlighting? Are you working toward tenure, or are you distracting yourself from that work? To whom are you writing these hybrid texts? Why? To write outside the academy is to be plagued by doubt, and the implications of these questions have led countless would-be bloggers, essayists, and tweeters to shut down their browsers. What, exactly, are you doing?

This question and its private terrors prompted us, in the summer of 2013, to seek answers in public. We sought answers from graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, junior faculty members, and distinguished senior faculty members in a roundtable we called *The Semipublic Intellectual? Academia, Criticism, and the Internet Age*, at the MLA convention in Chicago. Our panel of writers—most of whom are contributors to this section—expounded on their experiences negotiating the divide between public writing and academic writing. They spoke critically about what that divide means to them, where it has taken them (or stranded them), whether it exists at all. The event was standing room only, and as the session ended, it was apparent that our audience had more questions than we had time to answer.

This special section seeks to provide a record and an expansion of that conversation—to address the professional possibilities and the anxieties brought about by the boom in online academic writing. The rise of the digital humanities has shown the invigorating opportunities for, as well as the limits of, deploying new technologies in the academy; academic journals have found new life publishing electronically, and many scholars have taken their research and their pedagogy online. Other developments have been less positive—

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the Internet “hactivist” Aaron Swartz’s arrest for the allegedly illegal downloading of a large number of academic articles from *JSTOR* became an important case for those thinking about how intellectual labor should circulate, particularly when many publicly funded resources are de facto privatized because of their method of delivery. Swartz’s suicide in response to what many described as prosecutorial overreach—thirteen indictments, with a possible fifty years of incarceration and one million dollars in fines—showed (among other things) the stakes of unlocking information that had been functionally restricted to members of the academy whose institutions could afford subscriptions (Manjoo). From this perspective, the town-gown divide is distressingly concrete. On the other end of the spectrum, MOOCs (massive open online courses), which advocates hoped would revolutionize education through giant virtual classrooms accessible to anyone, continue to be vexed by an unacceptably high attrition rate. Things are in flux, and the academy is struggling to respond responsibly and productively to platforms that torque the conventional (and undertheorized) boundary between the ivory tower and the public.

The blurring of this boundary cuts both ways; as the academy filters out into other forms, academic standards are beginning to exert some pressure on certain types of highbrow journalism that favor a style that erases signs of effort—including research—by paraphrasing or borrowing from sources without citing them. A controversy was recently sparked by allegations that an article by Evgeny Morozov in the *New Yorker* relied on the work of another scholar, Eden Medina, yet only passingly acknowledged her contribution. According to Lee Vinsel, “In the Medina-Morozov situation, we have a well-known tech critic (Morozov) and a powerful periodical (*The New Yorker*) borrowing heavily from a young, female professor’s work without due recognition.” Morozov’s

response is instructive; one of his claims is that he was limited by stylistic constraints imposed not just by the *New Yorker* but by public writing itself:

[In the *New Yorker*] there are no footnotes. There are no end notes. In addition, there are also many invisible demands imposed by the narrative form of an essay for a popular magazine that are not present in academic writing. . . . My responsibility as an author is both to the readers AND to the sources that I draw upon. “Readability” is a much greater factor in this kind of popular writing than it is in academic prose.

The polite fiction of popular writing is that obscuring sources is in the reader’s interest—a position that conveniently overlooks the benefits that accrue to the author and publication as a result. Indeed, the academy has always had an ambivalent relation to popularizers, from Herbert Spencer to Jonah Lehrer. But the work of these writers—who render complicated scholarly ideas relatable to broad audiences—needn’t be without visible rigor, and publications from *The New Inquiry* to the *Atlantic* to *Grantland* have begun experimenting with footnotes and other modes of citation to make the process of popular synthesis more transparent. This must be, at least in part, because many academics are among the most recent waves of popularizers online.

There are intellectual as well as political reasons, then, for scholars to gravitate toward these hybrid platforms and the ambiguous middle ground they offer. In addition to providing new research tools and allowing academic articles to be published faster, the rise of the digital brings with it the possibility of a larger, more diverse audience for work that has traditionally had low circulation. As the work of academics becomes more accessible, academics have begun to take advantage by expanding the kinds of public writing they undertake. Scholars have long occupied the blogosphere, but in the past few years—

spurred on in part by the success of print journals like *n+1*—forums like *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, *The New Inquiry*, *Public Books*, *The Feminist Wire*, *The Root*, and *Avidly* have emerged online to offer a new kind of criticism for a readership that includes but also transcends the academy. Mainstream sites like *Slate*, *Salon*, and even *The Huffington Post* have followed suit, soliciting academics for expert takes on contemporary cultural and political issues.

These new forums have prompted a kind of gold rush by academics hungry for new audiences and broader forms of intellectual exchange, but they have also thrown into relief some of the unspoken tensions that undergird critical expression in the academy. Questions of scholarly rigor have arisen alongside well-reasoned defenses of specialist, discipline-specific discourse and concerns over the proper, improper, and unusual uses of scholarly credentials. How scholarly is a public intellectual? How public ought a scholar to be? In an essay for this section, Hua Hsu tracks the history of the public intellectual as a controversial figure and recalls Richard Posner's recommendation in 2001 that, in lieu of peer review of public work, scholars ought to list all their nonacademic writing on a platform where it could be "periodically reviewed' and, presumably, ridiculed." The concern that nonacademic prose produced by academics lacks rigor has diminished somewhat in the intervening decade—thanks in large part to the ever-increasing popularity of the scrupulously researched "longread" genre online—but the question of how nonacademic work ought to be considered in the academy remains unsolved. To what extent, and with what consequences, does one's professional identity shape one's private identity, and vice versa?

The essays in this section take a variety of approaches to this question, which has gained fresh urgency with the recent "dehiring" of Steven Salaita, the professor whose offer of a tenured post in the American Indian Studies

Program at the University of Illinois, Urbana, was rescinded following his publication of tweets supporting Gaza and criticizing Israel. Even as the Salaita affair reminded scholars of their increasingly precarious position in the modern university, it also revealed a new blurriness surrounding what exactly constitutes a scholar's output. This crystallizes a peculiarly modern problem: when academics venture into the public sphere—even informally, as on *Twitter*—the academy might use their extracurricular rhetorical performances (which would not have been as accessible in earlier decades) to police their professional activities. The Salaita case dealt a blow to any utopian vision of the productive overlap between public and scholarly work: What are the limits of academic freedom in this new media landscape, and how do they intersect with one's professional responsibilities as a teacher and one's right to free speech as a private citizen? And, as we become fluent in new modes of engagement online, how can we trust that those modes will translate without misrepresentation to those responsible for the future of our professional livelihoods?

These matters are newly in flux when a chancellor justifies a decision not to approve a departmental hire by voicing a principle with dangerous scope—namely, that the university "cannot and will not tolerate . . . personal and disrespectful words or actions that demean and abuse either viewpoints themselves or those who express them" (Wise, "Principles"). Over the long-standing objections of the American Association of University Professors ("1940 Statement"), "civility" appears to be emerging as a significant criterion for scholarly evaluation. Chancellor Nicholas Dirks, of the University of California, Berkeley, recently commemorated the Free Speech Movement by e-mailing the campus community that "free speech and civility are two sides of a single coin," and the board and president of the University of Illinois, Urbana, issued a statement declaring an "expectation of a

university community that values civility *as much as scholarship*" (Wise, "Atmosphere"; emphasis added). These are fraught equivalences. If "viewpoints themselves" cannot be disrespected in an academic context even as debate flourishes (sometimes uncivilly) in a rapidly expanding public sphere, it is clear that these hybrid platforms are threatening the conventions as well as the borders of academic institutions, radically upending once settled questions and eliciting sometimes reactionary answers. We are at a moment when the relation between a person's work as scholar and as citizen is being codified anew, and it falls to the academic community to prevent hasty and sometimes disastrously unconsidered policies from ossifying into administrative practice.

This new wave of academics writing online demands other renegotiations too: specifically, of the ways the academy has tended to value scholarly time. What happens when critics trained to produce work in the glacially slow and specialized scholarly publishing cycle enter into a discourse community built on the easy publication and instant back-and-forth of a blog and its comments section? Can scholarship exist at these two speeds, and can these modes be complementary? Shifting the pace and intended audience of scholarly writing has other effects, of course: many academics find that writing for nonacademic venues changes their prose style, because these venues (unlike much peer review) tend to expose academics to stylistic as well as substantive editing and because the demands of a wider audience are simply different. This could be understood as a dumbing down of scholarly rhetoric, but it can—and, as Sharon Marcus argues here, perhaps it should—be understood instead as an expansion of a scholar's linguistic repertoire consistent with other forms of pedagogical flexibility. Another epiphenomenon of speed is the sensation of amplified stakes. Online publishing allows scholarly work to receive responses right away instead of after the year

or three it takes a book to receive reviews or a scholarly article to attract a readership. Even if the effect is illusory, provocative ideas can begin to feel all the more so when they're able to provoke a reaction so quickly and with the characteristic intensity of an online forum.

This is not an unmixed blessing. Scholarly culture is not particularly suited to intense, rapid debate, and this shows in the pace and tone of our professional disagreements. Wary of informal public modes of intellectual engagement, we as academic critics gravitate toward more intimate models, where disagreements either stay politely off the record or are published so long after the text to which they respond that only the determined can follow the conversation. The snail's pace of this process makes prolonged engagements difficult to conduct and even harder to track. We have been failing to witness our own arguments.

How much can or should online criticism change our expectations about scholarship and its attendant timelines? Tenure clocks and job applications still depend on peer review, so what place is there for "longform," researched review essays published online? What effect (positive or negative) does online engagement have on an academic career? How has the audience for online writing affected the style, even the genre, of academic scholarship? Moreover, can academic critics profitably adjust to engagement with the quick, often contentious reactions of an online readership? If in the best-case scenario online scholarship brings about a new era of intellectual debate, instant feedback, and engaged dialogue, is the worst-case scenario an institutionalization of academic gossip networks? Are we witnessing a transformation of the assumptions of scholarship, or are we witnessing a schism in academic personalities?

We have coined the term *semipublic intellectual* to encapsulate this particularly twenty-first-century situation and give a name to an identifiable, if constantly shifting,

relation between scholars and the academy. Our contributors do a great deal to sketch out the theory and practice of this term, but for us the object of this section is less to define what the semipublic intellectual is than to acknowledge the role as a reality for which we must account. Indeed, this term is constitutively amorphous because the audience generated by an online piece is harder to predict than the audience of an academic journal.

Suppose, for instance, that a faculty member writes a two-thousand-word review essay on a new book and publishes the text online at *Bookforum* or *n+1*. In one scenario, the essay might reach only a small, specialized, largely academic audience. The scholar's readership does not necessarily change, but the ideas circulate more easily. The scholar acts as a semipublic intellectual, reaping the benefits of speed and accessibility that the Internet provides. In another scenario, the scholar publishes the essay in the same place, but thanks to a few lucky clicks, the piece "jumps platforms" and reaches unexpected publics—a phenomenon Natalia Cecire describes in her essay in this section. It might even "go viral." Mainstream writers with an interest in the topic might share links to it on social media, leading nonspecialists, curious about the new ideas they've come across, to start discussing the piece on *Twitter* or message boards. The readership is no longer a few dozen academics but potentially many general readers, as well as academics. This too is the work of the semipublic intellectual. To be able to present one's scholarship in such a way that it edifies and provokes generally interested readers as well as professional peers is a special skill but one that ever more scholars want to develop. The semipublic intellectual, then, embodies potentiality instead of performing a concrete practice. How do we produce work that fits comfortably within our ingrained understanding of responsible, rigorous scholarship but that doesn't need to be bound by the institutional structures of our disciplines?

In describing the invigorating, precarious position of academic writing online, we hope to do two things. First, we want to promote understanding. Not every academic needs to take a tutorial in digital literacy, but as the number of faculty members at all stages who practice some form of scholarship online grows, it behooves us as a profession to endeavor to comprehend what they are doing. The MLA took a structural step to address this evolution in scholarly practice by hiring Kathleen Fitzpatrick as director of scholarly communication in 2011. Fitzpatrick, who cofounded the growing online scholarly community *MediaCommons* and wrote the prescient *Planned Obsolescence: Publishing, Technology, and the Future of the Academy* (2011), has long advocated adaptation in academia. As she writes, "The production of knowledge is the academy's very reason for being, and if we cling to an outdated system for establishing and measuring authority while the nature of authority is shifting around us, we run the risk of becoming increasingly irrelevant to contemporary culture's dominant ways of knowing" (17). To come to terms with the rise in online academic writing is to acknowledge the ways in which the academy is already productively responding to these broader cultural shifts.

If the rise in academic-friendly forums online has done anything, it has quickly diversified the ways in which scholars can express their ideas. Every new medium carries with it new conventions and a new lingua franca. Writers for *The New Inquiry*, for instance, can produce short, provocative blog posts, book reviews, long researched essays, theoretical treatises, and visual essays. And scholars use *Twitter* for everything from networking to essay drafting to promoting scholarly work. If, as the University of Illinois, Urbana, has demonstrated, these modes of expression can count in promotion, tenure, and hiring decisions, then faculty members, deans, and administrators ought to know what it is they are

counting. These scholarly products need to be assessed on their own terms. An agreed-upon set of conventions and assumptions determine how the peer-reviewed essay is structured and judged. They are easily recognizable in our field, but they might not be to editors at mainstream magazines or even to scholars in other fields. Online essays, blogs, tweets, and all the other forms of digital scholarly production have their own conventions as well—such works should not be faulted for failing to meet the standards of peer review any more than a peer-reviewed article should be faulted for exceeding 140 characters.

This brings us to our second goal in this section: we want to insist that this writing be recognized. Our contributors make diverse proposals for how this writing can and should intersect with our scholarly lives and output. But, at its base, this section is a plea to recognize the potential value of these forays and to value the time spent on and saved by them. We urge departments, deans, and administrators to consider the degree to which writing on blogs and in semipublic forums is already contributing to the professional advancement of the professoriat and to appreciate how much positive attention this type of public engagement can bring to higher education in a climate where positive attention is often hard to come by. We urge those with power to decide these issues to consider that the time devoted to writing outside peer review needn't be segregated from time spent on the book project or on new articles. While we certainly do not call for the abolition of peer review, we urge readers to look at the examples two of our contributors provide—*The Los Angeles Review of Books* and *Public Books*—and at numerous similar forums and to recognize the different and exciting ways that scholarly authority can be expressed in the current landscape. If our scholarship truly is about the content of our research and the quality of our insights, we ought to embrace the possibility of speeding up and expanding our conver-

sations instead of being content to check off boxes on the route to professionalization. The peer-reviewed publication has great value, but it is not the only or even the best way to foster generative discussions that move beyond the artificial yet strictly drawn boundaries of our fields and specialties. How much more can the academy benefit from having rigorous, researched, longform scholarship written with a populist eye and read by thousands of people online than it already benefits from having rigorous, researched, longform scholarship read by a specialist audience? What, exactly, can we lose from devoting a portion of our time to these pursuits?

But how should this material be recognized? Our proposal is simple: the type of writing that we describe here should be understood as valuable public engagement. Peer review is well enshrined as the standard of academic scholarship, even as initiatives like *MediaCommons* challenge its conventional implementation. Michael Bérubé provides a necessary critique of that standard in his essay here, but, in one form or another, peer review is likely to remain the engine of scholarly rigor for the foreseeable future. The rise of online academic writing by no means necessitates the decline of peer review, but it is imperative that the system that recognizes reviewed scholarship be amended to recognize other forms of knowledge production and exchange.

We acknowledge that asking for a separate standard for the evaluation of non-peer-reviewed writing or scholarship is, in some sense, asking to have it both ways. We want to be recognized for our work, for our time, but the ambiguity of online spaces forces us to be circumspect. We want credit for circulating ideas, but we want to avoid the risk of being misrepresented or misunderstood. The new media for scholarly expression are dynamic, and their dynamism makes them unstable. And so our modest proposal is that this work be understood as something qualitatively dif-

ferent from peer-reviewed scholarship but no less important than it. We propose thinking about the work of the semipublic intellectual as the same kind of professional activity as giving a public lecture, starting a colloquium series, or organizing a conference. In other words, we don't want online essays or blog posts to be necessarily reviewable in the same way peer-reviewed articles are—simply because they can't be as rigorously researched and footnoted—but they should be understood as valuable and powerful ways of making scholarship public.

Our contributors are all invested in theorizing the semipublic sphere and understanding what happens to our ideas as they move back and forth across the transom. For Evan Kindley and Hua Hsu, this means situating our work as a new wrinkle in the long institutional history of the public intellectual. In the light of these negotiations of this somewhat romanticized notion of scholarly activity, Natalia Cecire points to the problematic nature of asserting authority—scholarly or otherwise—in a space where the concept of authority is regarded with skepticism and even resentment. Sharon Marcus, then, thinks about the responsibilities incumbent on those who step outside the comfortable feedback loop of the academy and about the ways in which we can encourage scholars to do so. Michael Bérubé reflects on how forays into wider publics influence things back home, how the work of the semipublic intellectual can and must influence the work done in the academy. And, finally, Salamishah Tillet endeavors to move beyond the spectrum

of the public and the semipublic to assert a hybrid scholarly identity rooted in the labor of making important cultural issues accessible across platforms and audiences.

We are not, then, expressing a utopian desire to have it both ways. Rather, by naming the semipublic intellectual, we recognize a position that already has it both ways, that exists in a constant state of negotiation betwixt and between shifting spaces. To occupy this position, with its potential rewards and pitfalls, is to be an academic in the Internet age—aware of all the barriers, real and imaginary, between the ivory tower and the public sphere.

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