

## Growing Up in Public: Academia, Journalism, and the New Public Intellectual

EVAN KINDLEY

WHEN I WAS IN GRADUATE SCHOOL TEN YEARS AGO, WE WERE DISCOURAGED FROM WRITING BOOK REVIEWS. THE PROFESSIONAL RATIONALES behind this advice were sound enough: book reviewing, whether for a scholarly journal or a mass-market publication, requires a considerable investment of time and a public statement of position. Neither venture was a risk that budding graduate students could afford: you don't want to make enemies in your field too soon, especially inadvertently, and you don't want to waste precious time forming an opinion before you've proved your entitlement to one, or so our professors' argument ran. We were advised, sensibly enough, to focus on our coursework and our own progress as scholars.

Following the letter if not the spirit of the law, I wrote film reviews instead. (I had my own counterrationalizations: it takes less time to watch a movie than to read a book, and Michel Gondry was unlikely to be sitting on my hiring committee.) The reviewing habit persisted, but it was always a sideline, secondary to my ambitions as an academic. It wasn't until I moved (still ABD) to Los Angeles in 2009 and became involved with the *Los Angeles Review of Books* that I began to take writing for a nonacademic audience more seriously. Working as managing editor for the first year of the publication's launch and as humanities editor for two years after that provided me with on-the-job training in various kinds of criticism and other non-fiction writing: a second education, immediately following the one I had just received in research and teaching. From the beginning, I worked with journalists, novelists, and poets as well as academics across a range of disciplines, including literature, history, sociology, philosophy, and media studies (often writing on books or topics outside their accredited areas of expertise). I solicited reviews from graduate school friends and from scholars whose work I admired.

All this constituted an unexpected career detour for me, but it seemed to make a certain kind of sense, both to me and to my advisers, perhaps because of the object of my scholarship. As I worked part-time for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, I was also publishing

EVAN KINDLEY, a visiting instructor at Claremont McKenna College and a founding editor of the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, recently completed a manuscript entitled "Critics and Connoisseurs: Poet-Critics and the Administration of Modernism."

articles in academic journals and finishing my dissertation on modernist poet-critics and the institutions (universities, little magazines, and philanthropic foundations) that had supported them. From a certain perspective, then, I could justify participating in the founding of a new literary institution as fieldwork.

I was lucky, moreover, to be entering the field at a time when such institutions were multiplying, especially on the Internet. In addition to the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, a number of prominent venues for public intellectuals emerged in those years, including the *New Inquiry* (founded in 2009) *Jacobin* (2010), *Avidly* (2012), and *Public Books* (2012). These publications joined existing academic-friendly little magazines like *n+1*, the *Point*, *Guernica*, *Cabinet*, the *Boston Review*, and the revived *Baffler*. All are open to academics—indeed, many of them are staffed, at least in part, by professors or graduate students—but they position themselves in a wider media landscape, regularly reaching audiences in the tens of thousands, both within the academy and without. (At the same time, larger publications like *Slate*, the *New York Times*, and the *Atlantic* have gradually become more hospitable to academic voices—partly, I’d wager, because of the influence of the smaller magazines.)

The result is that, for the first time in decades, there is a lively journalistic public sphere in the United States that is not only accessible but welcoming to academic scholars. Over the past five years, we have been experiencing the restoration of the kind of intellectual middle ground that academics took for granted during the postwar heyday of critical little magazines like the *Partisan Review*, *Commentary*, and the *Kenyon Review* but that fell into decline, for reasons too complicated and controversial to treat adequately here, in the late twentieth century.

The contents of the *Los Angeles Review of Books* and other new online little magazines—typically, closely argued essays on art, politics, or culture upward of two thousand

words—do not represent a concession to cultural conservatives who have long complained of the inaccessibility of academic writing. The contributors to these reviews don’t write as if theory never happened; they just don’t write as if nothing else has happened, or is worth talking about, either. (Indeed, one benefit of these magazines is the way they undermine the lazy, culture-war-era equation of theoretical sophistication and stylistic difficulty.) These publications are, on the whole, more experimental and eclectic than what we’ve come to expect from established literary organs like the *New York Review of Books*, the *London Review of Books*, the *New Yorker*, and the *Times Literary Supplement*. They are more likely to take seriously both contemporary popular culture and recent trends in criticism, scholarship, and academic life. They are also, on average, more open to women and people of color (though there is, without question, considerable room for improvement).

I get the impression that many academics approve of this recent renaissance of public intellectualism, at least in principle, but that we have only begun to think through its significance for our profession. We say we value public writing because it makes possible communication between “the public” and “the academy”: it provides an opportunity to help more people understand our activities as scholars and why they’re important. Then, too, it allows us to intervene in debates of the moment. On this view, writing an op-ed or a book review is regarded as a form of community outreach, an act of intellectual charity. Journalists are just as attached to this voluntarist ideal as academics; consider Nicholas Kristof’s much discussed 2014 op-ed “Professors, We Need You!,” which chided academics for their insularity and failure to address the issues of the day, as if, by pursuing teaching and research rather than public writing, we were hoarding or monopolizing knowledge and expertise that ought to be common property.

I don't deny the benefit of sharing, or explaining, or intervening. But public writing is just as important, I think, for the conversations it enables within and between professions. In other words, it offers as much value to *us* (the professors) as it does to *them* (the public, which ostensibly "needs us"). In what follows, I'll focus on two essential points about public writing that my experience as an editor at the *Los Angeles Review of Books* made clear to me: first, such writing allows academics to develop ties and maintain solidarity with working journalists, and, second, it provides junior academics with opportunities to contribute to important critical discussions and to exchange ideas with their seniors on a more equal basis than peer-reviewed scholarship.

### Academics and Journalists

As those with a foot in both worlds know well, there are long-standing tensions between the professions of journalism and academia. Academics, especially in the humanities, are rarely happy with the way the press depicts their work (the *New York Times's* turkey-shoot coverage of the MLA convention being a perennial example), and journalists often default to the stereotype of the academic scholar as arrogant, cloistered, and privileged (though the ongoing attention to the adjunct crisis in venues like *Slate*, the *Atlantic*, and the *Washington Post* may be changing that). Often these tensions are expressed in aesthetic terms, as a criticism of styles of writing: journalists frequently repeat the canard that academics "can't write," whereas academics are likely to dismiss journalism touching intellectual matters as underthought and beholden to a false ideal of linguistic transparency that, to critics trained in postdeconstructive analytic subtlety, looks like pandering.

Editing is one arena where such ambient tensions get expressed and—tentatively, temporarily—resolved. As an editor at the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, I observed

that, on the whole, journalists were more receptive to line editing and to suggestions about framing, while academics tended to be touchier about direct editorial input, objecting to changes and defending their original rhetorical choices at great length. (There were certainly exceptions to this rule; many academics, especially less experienced ones, were delighted to have their prose receive the sentence-level editing that is now all but extinct in academic publishing.)

But this sensitivity to editing cut both ways: freelance journalists, used to accommodating editors and juggling deadlines, were sometimes *too* quick to accede to my suggestions, whether they understood or agreed with them or not, in order to terminate the process and move on to the next assignment. Academics, for their part, seemed to care more about what went out with their name on it; this concern led to more drafts and more work (for both of us), but the additional effort often resulted in the most nuanced and thoughtful pieces. And these pieces, in turn, would inspire some of the more ambitious journalists to write essays as careful and sophisticated as what the finicky academics produced. In the best-case scenario, both sides are challenged to produce better work by adjusting to norms not native to their professions, thus raising the level of the discourse of cultural criticism as a whole.

There are obvious advantages to this friendly interprofessional competition, in which academics and journalists inhabit a single venue that neither can claim as uniquely theirs. In such a medium, ideas and attitudes can move back and forth between academics and journalists more easily, without as many distortions or "mistranslations." Talented journalists can popularize and give new purchase to matters of long-standing concern in the academy (like economic inequality or structural racism): Ta-Nehisi Coates's "The Case for Reparations," which builds on decades of scholarship by historians, sociologists,

and political scientists on redlining and its long-term economic effects on black neighborhoods, is a sterling recent example. Good-faith skeptical responses to academic arguments from journalists (as opposed to knee-jerk dismissals) can help scholars understand potential weaknesses in their work, and push them in directions they might not have discovered through the usual disciplinary process of peer review. And academics can help convince journalists—and, through them, their readers—of the seriousness of threats to higher education: thorough critiques of MOOCs by Aaron Bady in the *New Inquiry* and Ian Bogost in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* arguably helped to frame debates about online education in more prominent venues like the *New York Times*, for instance.

By providing an intermediate space accessible to both journalists and academics, the new little magazines can help us overcome, or at least reduce, our mutual unintelligibility and disdain. But these publications may exacerbate a different source of tension between the two professions, especially in the current parlous economic climate of online publishing. This is the issue of payment. Because academics can often afford to waive payment or accept a token honorarium (and are more accustomed to writing for exposure rather than money), working journalists often perceive academics as dilettantes or, worse, scabs.<sup>1</sup> From this point of view, academics don't enhance journalism; they undermine it, by providing a workforce that can perform the same (or similar) labor for virtually nothing.

It's certainly true that fledgling little magazines would have a lot more trouble finding excellent material if it weren't for academics who can forgo remuneration because they are supported by a salary or a stipend. One probable consequence of this trend, if left unchecked, is that the ratio of academics to journalists in these magazines, already quite high, will gradually increase. Such a development, to my mind, would defeat the purpose

of these venues: the participation of both journalists and academics in a common intellectual project is part of what gives these magazines their vitality and influence. To address the inequity of this situation and the value of having professional journalists in conversation with professional academics, universities and university presses should consider taking a more active role in the funding of the most important little magazines, as they did in the mid-twentieth century when they published magazines like the *Kenyon Review*, the *Sewanee Review*, and the *Virginia Quarterly Review*. (The MIT Press's financial support for the *Baffler* and the University of California Press's for *Boom: A Journal of California*—both magazines that bridge the divide between journalists and academics—are steps in the right direction.) Paradoxically, by playing a larger role in supporting little magazines, universities might allow them to avoid becoming populated entirely by academics.

### Juniors and Seniors

Another feature of the new little magazine is the relatively level playing field it presents to scholars at various stages of the academic profession. The *Los Angeles Review of Books*, for instance, regularly accepts pitches and submissions from graduate students and recent PhDs, and many of its most successful and influential essays have been written not by academic celebrities but by emerging scholars (many of whom are simultaneously publishing work in peer-reviewed journals).<sup>2</sup> In theory, of course, scholarly journals are open to all ranks of the profession, too. But space is more limited in these journals, which appear at most four times a year, than in online magazines, which publish new material daily, and the path to publication is longer and more arduous, thus privileging contributors with more institutional resources and time carved out for research. Further, the journals most accessible to junior scholars

are the most narrowly disciplinary and thus least likely to capture the attention of senior scholars in other subfields.

As the continuing crisis in academic hiring extends the time to tenure-track positions and weakens the incentives to produce peer-reviewed articles, one unanticipated—but not unwelcome—consequence is a boom in public writing by younger academics. In 1987 Russell Jacoby's *The Last Intellectuals* argued controversially that there was a "missing generation" of public intellectuals who had been absorbed into the university and focused more of their energy on advancing professionally than they did on contributing to public discourse. We are, perhaps, seeing the obverse of that late-twentieth-century professionalizing process: the missing generation, this time, is an academic one, and it is online journalism that is absorbing its excess intellectual energy.

This raises a question about the changing profession that graduate programs need to address. The idea behind my alma mater's prohibition on book reviewing was that we were all at the beginning of long careers and that once those careers were well under way we would have time to enter the public sphere. In other words, public writing was not discouraged but *delayed*: it was seen as a valuable activity, but one that ought to be pursued only once one's disciplinary bona fides were in order. Such a cautionary policy is sensible enough in a market where graduate students are at most six years away from a tenure-track position (and, if all goes smoothly, no more than a decade from tenure itself). I imagine, a little wistfully, the ideal career trajectory our advisers had in mind for us: we'd start with a big professional push, and various forms of public writing (an op-ed here, a book review there) would creep in at the margins as the CV-ready attainments accumulated.

The reality, of course, is that since 76.4% of faculty members in the United States are adjuncts (according to a report issued by the American Association of University Profes-

sors in April 2014 ["Employment Status"]), most current graduate students will never tread this once conventional career path. Those that do eventually access the tenure track will likely spend an additional three to five years in postdoctoral or contingent faculty positions before doing so (or delay finishing their PhDs until tenure-track jobs are offered or their departments finally force them out). If they wait patiently to become safely "professional" before they go "public," they are probably facing down a decade. A few diligent people may, eventually, secure tenure-track jobs by following this counsel. But, in the process, the public sphere loses a dynamic and articulate portion of the academic population.

Anyone who keeps abreast of today's online intellectual scene can attest to what a loss this would be. As the political theorist Corey Robin pointed out in a response to Kristof's jeremiad, plenty of public intellectuals in academia weigh in on important issues of the day: it's just that many of them are graduate students or recent PhDs without tenure-track jobs, and they write for personal blogs or little magazines rather than the *New York Times* or the *New Yorker*. "Whenever I read these folks," Robin writes, "I have to remind myself that they're still in grad school (or just a few months out)." Nonetheless, he adds, "I often wonder and worry about [their] job prospects. . . . Are future employers going to take a pass on them simply because they've written as brilliantly and edgily as they have?" The question haunts any junior scholar who spends a significant amount of time and energy writing for the nonacademic public.

### The New Public Intellectual

The new public intellectualism—which manifests itself, as we have seen, as both a renaissance and a crisis—raises the specter of old questions that our profession has never really answered. Is writing for the public a mere

sideline for academics, or is it an extension of their scholarship? Is it a core skill that should be encouraged and supported from graduate school on or a perk of seniority, reserved for those who have paid their dues and proved their right to be heard? These are questions every academic with an interest in writing for the public would do well to consider, but they are especially relevant for scholars in earlier stages of their careers. At the very least, graduate programs should acknowledge that these issues exist.

Part of the reluctance to do so is practical and structural: we've developed clear benchmarks for success when it comes to peer-reviewed scholarship, but we don't yet have them for public writing. But part of it is symbolic, bound up with the profession's vision of itself and its relation to public culture. The problem is not that the profession rejects the idea of the public intellectual outright: clearly, this is not the case. Rather, it is that it fetishizes that role, reserving the title of public intellectual as one of its highest honors. For the past twenty-five years or so, we've been used to thinking of public intellectuals as heroic, magisterial figures. We say the words and a pantheon of illustrious names—Trilling, Said, Fish, Bloom, Gates, Butler, Spivak: take your pick—immediately springs to mind. Such figures typically make their names as scholars or theorists in the academy before being called on to speak *for* it (or against it, but still in its name). Even when such figures are critical of their disciplines or institutions, they speak as the profession's distinguished representatives, its best and brightest.

Today the notion of who counts as a public intellectual—and, indeed, what counts as the public—is changing fast, and there is no question that online publication and social networking technology, as well as the constriction of the academic job market, are unsettling old hierarchies. Though my focus has been on edited publications, the influence of unfiltered social media changes the equation

further: the number of academics and other intellectuals who have active blogs or *Twitter* accounts with significant followings is staggering. (Such new forms of engagement raise important questions about ethics, civility, accountability, and academic freedom: the case of Steven Salaita, discussed at length elsewhere in this symposium, is obviously pertinent.) These new public intellectuals are sometimes, but not always, leading scholars in their fields. If their authority is founded on specific expertise, this is not necessarily reflected in their formal credentials or their academic standing. Seniority counts for little, and while institutional affiliation is not entirely irrelevant—academics, being academics, will still check where someone teaches or received training—it is considerably less important than it would be in more official professional contexts.

The diffusion of the rhetorical authority that a few eminent public intellectuals once possessed is both exciting and a little disorienting. From a democratic perspective, it's clearly a good thing that more of us have a chance to speak and be heard outside our immediate institutional surroundings. But it makes the representative function that public intellectuals have always fulfilled harder to sustain, for better or worse. And it also moves the activity of public intellectualism further outside the standard mechanisms of professional control at a time when public writing is more essential to the development of the average academic career than ever before.

So what should we do to respond to these changes? Beyond the suggestion that universities do more to fund existing little magazines, my answers are, predictably, academic. One future project for scholars that might complement this uncertain moment: histories of different kinds of public intellectuals and of social arrangements and institutions that have made interaction between intellectuals and the public possible. This project would include archaeologies of the present

moment, as well as revisionary accounts of eras dominated by famous figures and intellectual tendencies. How have intellectuals in different eras tried to make themselves intelligible to a wider public? What risks has this attempt entailed, and what long-term effects has it had? Of particular interest is the symbiotic relation between the university and the little magazine and, more broadly, between academia and journalism: an underexplored but rich area of scholarly inquiry.

At the same time, our profession should do more to acknowledge and value the public writing that so many of its members are already producing, and to clarify how this work relates to the core academic competencies of teaching and research. Not all academics aspire to write for the public, and no one is suggesting that they should, nor that public writing should replace scholarship. But in a profession that currently frustrates the ambitions of even its most committed and talented members at almost every stage, the resurgence of public writing is a rare occasion for optimism about the future of organized intellectual life. We should do all we can to understand and support what is already going on.

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## NOTES

1. See Nair and my response to her.

2. Of the twenty most viewed *Los Angeles Review of Books* articles (as of 6 Sept. 2014), thirteen were by academic scholars, only five of whom were in tenured or tenure-track positions. I am grateful to Tom Lutz for providing this information.

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