The Tech Intellectuals

The good, bad, and ugly among our new breed of cyber−critics, and the economic imperatives that drive them.

Henry Farrell

A quarter of a century ago, Russell Jacoby lamented the demise of the public intellectual. The cause of death was an improvement in material conditions. Public intellectuals—Dwight Macdonald, I.F. Stone, and their like—once had little choice but to be independent. They had difficulty getting permanent well−paying jobs. However, as universities began to expand, they offered new opportunities to erstwhile unemployables. The academy demanded a high price. Intellectuals had to turn away from the public and toward the practiced obscurities of academic research and prose. In Jacoby's description, these intellectuals "no longer need[ed] or want[ed] a larger public…. Campuses [were] their homes; colleagues their audience; monographs and specialized journals their media."

Over the last decade, conditions have changed again. New possibilities are opening up for public intellectuals. Internet−fueled media such as blogs have made it much easier for aspiring intellectuals to publish their opinions. They have fostered the creation of new intellectual outlets (*Jacobin*, *The New Inquiry*, *The Los Angeles Review of Books*), and helped revitalize some old ones too (*The Baffler*, *Dissent*). Finally, and not least, they have provided the meat for a new set of arguments about how communications technology is reshaping society.

These debates have created opportunities for an emergent breed of professional argument−crafters: technology intellectuals. Like their predecessors of the 1950s and '60s, they often make a living without having to work for a university. Indeed, the professoriate is being left behind. Traditional academic disciplines (except for law, which has a magpie−like fascination with new and shiny things) have had a hard time keeping up. New technologies, to traditionalists, are suspect: They are difficult to pin down within traditional academic boundaries, and they look a little too fashionable to senior academics, who are often nervous that their fields might somehow become publicly relevant.

Many of these new public intellectuals are more or less self−made. Others are scholars (often with uncomfortable relationships with the academy, such as Clay Shirky, an unorthodox professor who is skeptical that the traditional university model can survive). Others still are entrepreneurs, like technology and media writer and podcaster Jeff Jarvis, working the angles between public argument and emerging business models.

These various new-model public intellectuals jostle together in a very different world from the old. They aren't trying to get review-essays published in *Dissent* or *Commentary*. Instead, they want to give TED talks that go viral. They argue with one another on a circuit of business conferences, academic meetings, ideas festivals, and public entertainment. They write books, some excellent, others incoherent.

In some ways, the technology intellectuals are more genuinely public than their predecessors. The little magazines were just that, little. They were written for an elite and well-educated readership that could be measured in the tens of thousands. By contrast, TED talks are viewed 7.5 million times every month by a global audience of people who are mostly well-educated but are not self-conscious members of a cultural elite in the way that the modal reader of *Partisan Review* might have been.

In other ways, they are less public. They are more ideologically constrained than either their predecessors or the general population. There are few radical left-wingers, and fewer conservatives. Very many of them sit somewhere on the spectrum between hard libertarianism and moderate liberalism. These new intellectuals disagree on issues such as privacy and security, but agree on more, including basic values of toleration and willingness to let people live their lives as they will. At their best, they offer an open and friendly pragmatism; at their worst, a vision of the future that glosses over real politics, and dissolves the spikiness, argumentativeness, and contrariness of actual human beings into a flavorless celebration of superficial diversity.

This world of conversation and debate doesn't float unsupported in the air. It has an underlying political economy, which is intuitively understood by many of its participants. As Jacoby emphasizes, all debates about ideas are shaped by their material conditions. The intellectual possibilities of the purported golden age of the 1950s were in part the product of bad pay, cheap rent, and a small but intensely engaged audience of readers. Those of the 1960s and '70s were influenced by a burgeoning university system, which rewarded intellectuals for writing impenetrably for an audience of their peers.

The possibilities today reflect a different set of material conditions again, which don't determine individual choices so much as they pull on them, gently but insistently. They influence what is discussed and what isn't, who wins and who loses. And much goes undiscussed. The working consensus among technology intellectuals depicts a world of possibilities that seems starkly at odds with the American reality of skyrocketing political and economic inequality. It glosses over the deep conflicts and divisions that exist in society and are plausibly growing worse. And the critics of this consensus fare no better. They work within the same system as their targets, in ways that compromise their rejoinders, and stunt the development of more useful lines of argument.

Attention, Attention

Technology intellectuals work in an attention economy. They succeed if they attract enough attention to themselves and their message that they can make a living from it. It's not an easy thing to do: Most aspiring technology intellectuals fail, whether because of bad luck (academic research shows that the market for attention is highly chancy) or because the relevant audiences aren't interested in hearing what they have to say.

This basic fact of the attention economy—how few entrants truly master it—is obscured by rhetoric about the Internet's openness to new and wonderful things. Technology intellectuals like Chris Anderson argue that culture is governed by a "long tail," a statistical pattern in which a few bands or books or magazines at the peak of the distribution are very well known indeed, followed by a rapid decline in visibility as the curve slopes down toward a "long tail" of very many bands or books or whatever, whom few people pay attention to. They claim that the Internet has changed the meaning of the long tail. People who don't like the things that everyone else likes don't have to pay attention to those things anymore. The Internet has made it much easier for them to find the things they *do* want to pay attention to, and build a community with others who share their tastes. If you prefer klezmer bands covering Deep Purple to Katy Perry, you will have a much easier time finding those bands and fellow fans today than you would have two decades ago.

The metaphor of the long tail, though, is misleading. Certainly, it is easier to find obscure books or bands than it used to be. But most people don't want to find obscure things—they want to focus their attention on what everyone else is paying attention to. Those who are already rich in attention are likely to get richer, while the long tail still trails off into darkness and obscurity.

To do well in this economy, you do not have to get tenure or become a contributing editor to *The New Republic* (although the latter probably doesn't hurt). You just need, somehow, to get lots of people to pay attention to you.

This attention can then be converted into more material currency. At the lower end, this will likely involve nothing more than invitations to interesting conferences and a little consulting money. In the middle reaches, people can get fellowships (often funded by technology companies), research funding, and book contracts. At the higher end, people can snag big book deals and extremely lucrative speaking engagements. These people can make a very good living from writing, public speaking, or some combination of the two. But most of these aspiring pundits are doing their best to scramble up the slope of the statistical distribution, jostling with one another as they fight to ascend, terrified they will slip and fall backwards into the abyss. The long tail is swarmed by multitudes, who have a tiny audience and still tinier chances of real financial reward.

This underlying economy of attention explains much that would otherwise be puzzling. For example, it is the evolutionary imperative that drives the ecology of technology culture conferences and public talks. These events often bring together people who are willing to talk for free and audiences who just might take an interest in them. Hopeful tech pundits compete, sometimes quite desperately, to speak at conferences like PopTech and TEDx even though they don't get paid a penny for it. Aspirants begin on a modern version of the rubber-chicken circuit, road-testing their message and working their way up.

TED is the apex of this world. You don't get money for a TED talk, but you can get plenty of attention—enough, in many cases, to launch yourself as a well-paid speaker ($5,000 per engagement and up) on the business conference circuit. While making your way up the hierarchy, you are encouraged to buff the rough patches from your presentation again and again, sanding it down to a beautifully polished surface, which all too often does no more than reflect your audience's preconceptions back at them.

A Culture of Conformity

Technology and media pundit Jeff Jarvis takes this logic to an extreme. He is the author of *What Would Google Do?: Reverse-Engineering the Fastest-Growing Company in the History of the World* and *Public Parts: How Sharing in the Digital Age Improves the Way We Work and Live*. He is a prolific blogger and podcaster, and a holotype of the technology intellectual as entity adapted to fit a given set of material conditions.

Public intellectuals are supposed to explain ideas and arguments for a larger public audience. Technology intellectuals such as Clay Shirky, Steven Johnson, Rebecca MacKinnon, Ethan Zuckerman, Siva Vaidhyanathan, and Nicholas Carr write books that do just this in very different ways. For example, Shirky's *Here Comes Everybody* applies ideas from his study of economic transaction costs to make a novel argument about how new communications technologies allow us to organize ourselves without traditional organizations. His conclusions can surely be challenged, and Shirky has changed his views in response to criticism, but they stand as a model of how to communicate important ideas, simply and clearly, to the broader public.

Jarvis's two books, in contrast, are branding exercises, ritual objects of exchange, not meant to introduce new insights so much as certify that the author occupies the role of the published guru. In *Public Parts*, Jarvis thanks entrepreneur Seth Godin for having encouraged him to become an author, recounting how Godin told him that he would be "a fool" not to write a book, and a bigger fool if he "thought the book was the goal." Instead, the book should "build [Jarvis's] public reputation, which would lead to other business." And it has done just that. While Jarvis's first book sold reasonably well, its royalties were almost certainly dwarfed by other sources of income—he claims that he requires up to $45,000 for a speaking engagement.

Unsurprisingly, the books are neither interesting nor good. Jarvis is a technology intellectual only in the sense that he fills a particular sociological niche. Overly provocative ideas would tarnish his brand. His books repackage the technology industry's intellectual prejudices and sell them back, all the while highlighting the author's many influential friends and the multitudes of important people who take him seriously. Like Randall Jarrell's President Robbins, Jarvis is so well attuned to his environment that sometimes you cannot tell which is the environment and which is Jarvis.

But Jarvis, however intellectually unappealing, is not the real problem. Every economic elite, in every age, has had its overt courtiers. More worrying are the more subtle homages paid by the new culture of public debate to the existing culture of the technology industry.

Technology debate relies tacitly or indirectly on the tech industry for many things: funding of conferences, support of fellowship positions, speaking engagements, a purchasing public for technology books. And this reliance manifests itself in the culture of argument. Nearly all prominent technology intellectuals (Siva Vaidhyanathan and Susan Crawford are honorable exceptions) share technology entrepreneurs' conviction that business has a crucial

role to play either in pushing back government to make room for market‒driven entrepreneurialism (the libertarian version) or working together with government to make balky bureaucracy more publicly responsive (the liberal‒leaning‒toward‒left version).

This is not a ridiculous position to hold. But when it is held by nearly everyone of prominence, it conducts toward a drab uniformity, a narrowness of vision of the possible that plagues otherwise excellent books. Eli Pariser's *The Filter Bubble* is just one example of a fine book that takes up real and interesting problems (how technologies like Google search, as they adapt to their users, may reinforce their prejudices) but that has only feeble recommendations for how to solve them (better corporate practices and perhaps a little bit more government oversight). Pariser, like most other technology intellectuals, takes it for granted that traditional politics shouldn't enter the world of new technologies, even when these technologies generate big political problems. Similarly, Tim Wu's *The Master Switch* has many wonderful insights about the persistent tendency toward monopoly among large communications firms. But as Paul Starr has pointed out, it assumes that government intervention is always a problem and never the solution.

There are few real left‒wingers among technology intellectuals. There are even fewer conservatives. The result is both blandness and blindness. Most technology intellectuals agree on most things. They rarely debate, for example, how private spaces governed by large corporations such as Google and Facebook can generate real inequalities of power. Much of our life is conducted online, which is another way of saying that much of our life is conducted under rules set by large private businesses, which are subject neither to much regulation nor much real market competition. Facebook users may not like the ways in which Facebook uses their personal information, but their only real choices are to put up with it or to cut themselves off from a large part of their social life. But these dilemmas go ignored by technology intellectuals, who consistently find themselves tugged toward other, safer issues, such as net neutrality, where the interests of the public and of large technology firms are more plausibly compatible.

To be clear, this suasion isn't typically a product of lobbying or deliberate strategy by the technology industry. It's usually far more indirect. The people (and businesses) who have pioneered the new technologies have strong convictions, which bleed over into the world of debate that they support and sometimes participate in. These convictions reflect both their experiences and their self‒interest.

Equally, this does not mean that current intellectual debates over technology are so compromised as to be worthless; for the most part, they are not. What it does mean is that these debates have a tidal force that pulls participants in certain directions and not others. Some participants, like the late Aaron Swartz, could artfully tack back and forth across these debates, while persistently trying to pull participants towards more directly political questions. Larry Lessig, for example, credits Swartz with having pushed him to realize that the public problems he wanted to solve could not be remedied without radically remaking the U.S. political system. However, to do as Swartz did is to work against the current, which few are inclined to do.

Troll and Response

And what of the critics of these new technology debates? Alas, the material conditions described above affect not only the debates' protagonists, but their critics as well. They help explain why these critics have not come up with any very convincing intellectual alternative to the mainstream they anathematize. These critics work within the same economy of attention as the people they want to argue against, and labor under many of the same intellectual burdens. Their obligation to gather attention undermines their purported goals.

Take *Digital Vertigo*, a recent book by the aspiring public intellectual and media entrepreneur Andrew Keen. Its main argument is a rambling diatribe on how the "very personality of contemporary man" is threatened by the hypervisibility that we suffer as we all succumb to the relentless scrutiny of social networks. Yet this critique is simultaneously a calculated effort by the author to become scrutinized by as many people on as many social networks as possible—Keen boasts about his number of Twitter followers, makes it clear that he would like to have many more, and volunteers to the reader that he aspires to become a highly visible "super‒node."

Keen's criticisms are self‒undermining because his intellectual commitments, if that is what they are, contradict his interest in becoming a well‒known technology intellectual. He wants both to attack the economy of attention and try his damnedest to succeed in it. The book's purpose is to attract notice and curry favor with the influentials whose names Keen drops assiduously at every opportunity. Its very incoherence demonstrates the constraining forces that it claims to have set its face against.

The most extraordinary example of these contradictions is the well−known cyber−pessimist Evgeny Morozov. Trolls—commentators who flout the norms of a given community in order to spur angry responses—are ubiquitous on the Internet. Morozov's success shows how trolling can be a viable business model for aspiring public intellectuals.

Morozov is a Belarusian who has received fellowships from the Open Society Institute, Yahoo!, the New America Foundation, and Stanford University. He once believed that new technologies had great political benefits, but has spent the last several years vigorously and repeatedly denouncing the "techno−utopianism" and "Internet−centrism" of other technology−focused public intellectuals. His brand identity is harsh denunciation. Morozov's first book, *The Net Delusion*, took aim at some of the more ludicrous claims about how the Internet spread democracy worldwide. His second, *To Save Everything, Click Here*, tries to do the same trick for technology−focused efforts to "solve" problems as varied as fixing potholes and stopping terrorism.

Morozov owes his success to an instinctive genius for leveraging the weaknesses of the system against itself. He shows how the attention economy can be hacked by someone sufficiently dedicated to making himself into a public nuisance. Morozov attacks prominent public intellectuals of technology, denigrating their motivations and distorting their arguments (sometimes to the point of intimating that these people are saying the opposite of what they do say). He then purports to refute the caricatures that he himself has created, and waits for the outraged reaction and ensuing controversy to attract attention.

To take a few examples: In his most recent book, Morozov depicts MIT Media Lab researcher Ethan Zuckerman, who repeatedly argues against grandiose claims that the Internet will bring the world closer together, as insisting that "the reason people from Idaho have not yet talked to people from India—except when on hold with a call center in Bangalore—is that [inadequate] technology somehow has stood in the way." Likewise in Morozov's telling, Jonathan Zittrain, who wants open−Internet advocates to accept the need for security and safe zones, becomes a zealot opposed to gatekeeping in nearly every form. Lessig, a notoriously mild−mannered constitutional law professor, is condemned for his "fanatical dedication to the religion of Internetcentrism." The unflappable Clay Shirky "brims with populist, antiestablishment rage." And so on.

By criticizing prominent intellectuals in ways that are both offensive and extravagantly wrong, Morozov tempts these intellectuals to respond in public. Their response (and Morozov's further responses to the response) attracts still more controversy and attention, fueling the next phase of a repeating cycle. When this strategy works, it creates a kind of perpetual motion machine of error and public controversy. The world being what it is, the error is forgotten, the controversy remembered, enhancing Morozov's stature and lecture visibility.

Morozov's relative success speaks to tensions between the new model of public intellectualism and the older academic one that it destabilizes around the edges. Despite his repeated references to the work of sociologist of science Bruno Latour, Morozov's approach is more aptly described by Pierre Bourdieu, another famous French sociologist. Bourdieu's most well−known book, *Distinction*, depicts traditional intellectuals as engaged in a perpetual semi−articulated struggle against the well−resourced bourgeoisie, in which they try to inflate the value of the intellectual and cultural capital that they are rich in, while discounting the relative worth of mere bourgeois economic capital. Just in this way, Morozov sells himself as a disinterested and true intellectual, deeply immersed in the academic literature. He characterizes his opponents, in contrast, as a pack of opportunistic quasi−literates on the make.

Keen and Morozov do not solve the problems of current technology debates: They exemplify them and recreate them in new forms. Both, in different ways, reproduce the system that they purport to attack. Both end up writing bad books because any interesting arguments they might have in them are overwhelmed by their need to position themselves in the attention economy. This is most crudely obvious in Keen's book, which in one breath condemns online "super−nodes" and in the next proclaims Keen's ambition to become one. With his relentless desire to become a network superpower by kissing up to those who already have this coveted status, Keen is all too obviously part of the problem that he affects to deplore. Behind the purported radicalism of an iconoclast and rebel lurks the unctuous garrulity of a tech−industry Dominick Dunne.

Morozov, in contrast, is all too happy to bite the hand that feeds him, as long as it provokes his victim to thrash around sufficiently. Steven Johnson, a subject of Morozov's attentions, and the author of *Emergence* and other excellent books, has memorably compared Morozov to "a vampire slayer [who] has to keep planting capes and

plastic fangs on his victims to stay in business." Yet Morozov is perhaps better compared to the vampire himself, affecting a lofty and aristocratic disdain so as to better mask his dependence on his victims for sustenance. If he did not have more mainstream technology intellectuals to bait, his *modus vivendi* would collapse.

This hidden dependency ruins Morozov's second book, which, like *Public Parts*, spends its energies promoting the author's brand rather than making a coherent argument (stare not too long into the Jarvis, lest it stare into thee). Its incoherence is deepened by Morozov's efforts to further discomfit his enemies by touting semi−digested arguments from the academic literature. Here and there the text hints at a different, and genuinely fascinating, project on the effect enduring political disagreements have on debates about technology, but the idea is never developed—it's the cheap hits that get the love. Morozov certainly has the capacity to write a good and serious book—it would be nice to see him try.

Ideas Worth Spreading

Different incentives would lead to different debates. In a better world, technology intellectuals might think more seriously about the relationship between technological change and economic inequality. Many technology intellectuals think of the culture of Silicon Valley as inherently egalitarian, yet economist James Galbraith argues that income inequality in the United States "has been driven by capital gains and stock options, mostly in the tech sector."

They might think more seriously about how technology is changing politics. Current debates are still dominated by pointless arguments between enthusiasts who believe the Internet is a model for a radically better democracy, and skeptics who claim it is the dictator's best friend.

Finally, they might pay more attention to the burgeoning relationship between technology companies and the U.S. government. Technology intellectuals like to think that a powerful technology sector can enhance personal freedom and constrain the excesses of government. Instead, we are now seeing how a powerful technology sector may enable government excesses. Without big semi−monopolies like Facebook, Google, and Microsoft to hoover up personal information, surveillance would be far more difficult for the U.S. government.

Debating these issues would require a more diverse group of technology intellectuals. The current crop are not diverse in some immediately obvious ways—there are few women, few nonwhites, and few non−English speakers who have ascended to the peak of attention. Yet there is also far less intellectual diversity than there ought to be. The core assumptions of public debates over technology get less attention than they need and deserve.

It is clear that good, tough criticism of these assumptions is possible. Tom Slee, a Canadian programmer and independent writer, has carved out a niche criticizing the politics of technology in a consistent and intellectually serious way (to be clear, I know Slee a little, and have tried in the past to promote his work; as an amateur in these debates, I have corresponded electronically with nearly everyone mentioned in this article, and have met a few in person). He has written extended work on the politics of Google, the dubious assumptions underlying optimistic arguments about the long tail, and many other topics. Slee has critiqued the ideas of prominent writers like Shirky, trying to highlight the differences between Shirky's interesting insights (as he sees them) and the places where he believes that Shirky succumbs to a generic optimism. He has ruthlessly criticized Steven Johnson's recent book *Future Perfect* for not paying attention to power and conflict. Yet he has leveled his critiques in the spirit of serious argument, and his subjects have indicated that they would like to return the favor, building the foundations of what might be a constructive, and perhaps even transformative, debate.

It is not so clear that such high−minded criticism is economically sustainable. In a blog post at the beginning of this year, Slee lamented his inability to build up a broader audience for his work, despite 15 years of economic sacrifice:

> [T]he numbers make it clear that it's not working. To reinforce that feeling, the traffic for an individual post at the blog depends hugely on whether some of a small number of individuals link to it: I am still dependent, that is to say, on patronage and on chance, and I have not managed to build an audience of my own to sustain significant interest.

Slee is perhaps unusually unworldly—as he readily admits, he is a rotten self−promoter. Yet cogent criticism of the kind he offers is innately a hard sell. It rubs against the grain of current debates. Obviously, it doesn't flatter the preconceptions of technological optimists. Yet it doesn't soothe the feelings of groups who feel themselves threatened by new technologies, such as traditional humanists. It's just the kind of engaged and intelligent social criticism that the best of the small magazines published in the 1950s and early '60s, but it doesn't have an obvious

home today.

There is a lot that is worthwhile about the new world of technology intellectualism. It connects the world of ideas to a broader public in ways that didn't happen in the heyday of the university, or even the heyday of the traditional public intellectual. It has elevated some smart and wonderful thinkers who would never have succeeded under traditional academic standards. Yet there are also many problems. It ignores the social conflicts and inequalities that shape American politics and the American economy.

It wouldn't be that hard to find underappreciated intellectuals, like Slee, who want to take issue with the debates as they are. Nor would it be very difficult to push the more thoughtful of the currently dominant intellectuals to respond. The difficult part is figuring out how genuinely contrary and interesting intellectuals can support themselves in a tacit economy that seems geared either to co‑opt them or turn them into professional controversialists. If the debate over ideas is shaped by material conditions, changing the debate requires changing the conditions. **D**

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Editors' Picks

Events

Democracy, **New America Foundation Co-host Panel on the AUMF and Drones**

Democracy: A Journal of Ideas: On January 13, *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas* and the New America Foundation co-hosted a panel discussion on the future of the AUMF and drone warfare.

News

Washington Post **Cites** *Democracy***'s Role in CFPB Creation**

Washington Post: In the January 11 edition of *The Washington Post*, a story by Lydia DePillis on the start of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau cited *Democracy*'s role in the creation and development of the agency.

Events

Hillman Foundation Hosts Event on "Fortress Unionism"

The Sidney Hillman Foundation: On Monday, December 2, the Sidney Hillman Foundation is hosting an event in New York City on the changing face of unionism. The panel will feature Rich Yeselson, whose recent essay in *Democracy*, "Fortress Unionism," will be a focus of the discussion.

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