

THE PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL IN CANADA

This illuminating, entertaining, and timely volume examines the place and impact of public intellectuals in our rapidly changing and diverse society. Boasting an all-star cast of contributors – including some of Canada’s most prominent writers, journalists, and academics – it probes the role of public discourse and intellectual persuasion in shaping Canada’s past, present, and future.

The Public Intellectual in Canada examines how individuals have come to assume this role, how they are received by various publics, and what they have been able to accomplish. The pieces cover topics ranging from the potential and perils of advocacy to the influence of think tanks on public policy. Many pieces also delve into the roles of pollsters, political actors, pundits, social activists, economists, and ethicists, among others.

Broad in scope and stylistically diverse, these essays offer a fascinating overview of the links between thought, public exposition, and action in the fields of politics, science, and culture.

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The Public Intellectual in Canada

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UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PRESS
Toronto Buffalo London

© University of Toronto Press 2013
Toronto Buffalo London
www.utppublishing.com
Printed in Canada

ISBN 978-1-4426-4526-4 (cloth)
ISBN 978-1-4426-1339-3 (paper)



Printed on acid-free, 100% post-consumer recycled paper with vegetable-based inks.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

The public intellectual in Canada / edited by Nelson Wiseman.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-4426-4526-4 (bound). – ISBN 978-1-4426-1339-3 (pbk.)

1. Intellectuals – Canada. 2. Canada – Intellectual life.

I. Wiseman, Nelson, 1946–, editor of compilation

FC95.5. P82 2013 305.5'520971 C2013-902086-1

University of Toronto Press acknowledges the financial assistance to its publishing program of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council.



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada



University of Toronto Press acknowledges the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund for its publishing activities.

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THE PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL IN CANADA

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Introduction

Caught up in a small-pond syndrome, Canadians can be self-deprecatingly modest. Invited to contribute to this book showcasing some of Canada's prominent public intellectuals, David Suzuki – whose syndicated television series *The Nature of Things* has been broadcast in over forty countries – asked: “Could you tell me what a public intellectual is so I can decide whether I’m competent enough to write something?” Denys Arcand – the winner of three dozen film awards including an Oscar for *The Barbarian Invasions*, which revisits the aging intellectuals of *The Decline of the American Empire* – responded with similar self-effacement: “You have been misinformed. I am not an intellectual. I am an old film director. I tell tales that I don’t always understand. The exact opposite of an intellectual who tries to make sense of the surrounding reality.” Protesting that he too was “uncomfortable” self-identifying as a public intellectual, for that would suggest he was taking on “airs,” pollster Michael Adams, whose best-selling books chart the values and value differences of Canadians and Americans, opted initially to write about “why Canada has no public intellectuals.” Somewhat less hesitantly Conrad Black, who had renounced his Canadian citizenship to accept a British peerage, responded from a prison cell in the United States: “I am not comfortable bandying about the phrase ‘public intellectual’ in reference to myself, not that I would contest its accuracy, just that it is un-Canadian in its portentousness.”¹

For many Canadians, like Suzuki, the public intellectual is a formless and vaguely amorphous notion, a barely recognizable creature. For others, like Adams and Black, the term carries the burden of pomposity. However disinclined they are to use the term to describe themselves, Suzuki, Arcand, Adams, and Black qualify as public intellectuals

precisely because they forsake excessive professionalization. They favour capturing a public culture in a world of ever-increasing hyper-specialization and an increasingly fragmented public space, communicating their ideas on an array of public issues to a wider audience beyond their narrow fraternity of peers.

In Canada, intellectually fertile periods have fluctuated with periods of arrested intellectual development. Unlike American, British, and French public intellectuals, who usually take for granted the worth of their work and the sturdy cultural foundations of their societies, Canada's public intellectuals have had to negotiate the shoals of Canadian identity as they have striven to reconfigure it. Labouring in the cultural shadow of the United States, they have resisted the pull of their neighbour and have helped to guide their country along a distinctive trajectory in its constant struggle with its identity. Their ideas about Canada and its future anticipate its fulfilment.

Because of their stronger European roots, and perhaps because of their native politeness and relative deference to authority, Canadians exhibit more respect for intellectuals than do Americans. In the United States, a deep-seated, easily tapped anti-intellectualism has infused political life.² English Canada's public intellectuals, however, have never evoked the reverence that Russians have for their intelligentsia nor have they become the media phenomenon they are in France, where the spectacle of television effectively conjoins information, entertainment, and opinion. As transmission belts between the public intellectual and her public, a country's media may transform a public intellectual – think of essayist John Ralston Saul, the first Canadian president of International PEN, or novelist Margaret Atwood – into a media personality, a celebrity intellectual.

In common with the continental French, francophone Quebecers have demonstrated a greater receptivity to public intellectuals than have English-speaking Canadians. Where in English Canada could a newspaper with the cerebral heft of *Le Devoir* attract an elite crowd including the provincial premier, the prime minister, and Quebec's captains of industry, as *Le Devoir* did in 1990, to a fund-raiser for the paper? (See Gregory Baum's essay in this collection.) Radio Canada's "*Tout le monde en parle*" – the name and format borrowed from its European forerunner – is another example of Quebecers' greater respect for intellectuals; they are not dismissively cast as eggheads. The program, featuring unrehearsed exchanges among artists, intellectuals, and politicians, attracts a million and a half viewers in a province with

fewer than seven million francophones, the equivalent of an Academy Awards-sized audience in the rest of Canada tuning in every week.³

As an independent critic, the public intellectual is a free-ranger who offers a breadth of vision that transcends any one particular branch of a science, art, or vocation; as such, he is much more than a scholar in a single field or a professional specialist. Unlike those who theorize narrowly or technically about their specific branch of learning or expertise, the public intellectual taps and channels the critical, contemplative, and creative sides of his audience's minds. Expressing himself in a publicly accessible manner on issues of general public concern, the public intellectual has no manual or reference guide to lead him.

Popularizing one's science is insufficient to qualify as a public intellectual unless an ethical or political dimension propels the message. Grounded and engaged with his world, the public intellectual is not alienated or disconnected dilettante hobbyist, no private intellectual content to toy leisurely with ideas. Driven by an audacious sense of obligation to himself and to society, he tells the truth the way he sees it, and in a democracy, dispelling ignorance is perhaps his first duty. Social commitment and civil courage delineates him from other intellectuals.

Today, most intellectuals – many in this collection – are ensconced as academics within universities. Professors research what interests them as they teach students, and like other public intellectuals are an elite privileged class with an ability to influence mass opinion. Karl Mannheim, the path-breaking theorist who founded the field now known as the sociology of knowledge and who criticized the overspecialization of academic disciplines, recognized that universities imposed certain status expectations of their professors and would frown on them adopting the role of a public intellectual. (Stephen Clarkson pursues this theme in his essay.)

An increasing number of public intellectuals work in ideologically driven think tanks and policy institutes such as the right-wing, Vancouver-based, Fraser Institute and Winnipeg's Frontier Centre for Public Policy and the left-leaning Ottawa-based Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and Caledon Institute of Social Policy. Some public intellectuals, such as John Richards (who writes on Aboriginal policy in this collection), has a foot in the university as well as at a think tank (C.D. Howe Institute). Pleading their positions, think tanks aspire to be policy "do tanks." Some public intellectuals occasionally toil as government intellectuals, at various times and among others in this collection, Tom Flanagan, Hugh Segal, and Pierre Fortin. In doing so, they are

often required to set aside and subordinate their critical and creative sides to the goals of the leader or the institution that recruits them. As well, there are social movement intellectuals, such as Baum and Maude Barlow who are more radical than government intellectuals, but who – with an intellectual temperament archetypally Canadian – disavow extremism. And there are public intellectuals such as Michael Adams, who hails from the worlds of business, and those like Doug Saunders, the widely read and honoured journalist.

Any selection of Canada's public intellectuals is arbitrary if not randomly chaotic. One man's public intellectual is another man's propagandist and what public intellectuals produce varies in quality and appears in an imperfect market. Best-sellerdom or temporal currency is not sufficient: rejected or overlooked in his own time, a public intellectual may have his ideas embraced in a subsequent era. Alternatively, they may exhaust themselves. Harold Innis, the only non-American to have served as president of the American Economics Association, shunned popular media and severely criticized academics who appeared therein. Others, however, extrapolated from his thesis regarding the exploitation of Canada's natural resources and the links those resources engendered between imperial and colonial cultures, and these students of Innis stimulated a broader public consciousness of his thinking about Canada's political and economic development. The widespread transmission of Innis's ideas – Canada's citizenship guide now refers to him⁴ – qualifies him as a public intellectual, although during his lifetime relatively few Canadians beyond the academy knew of him. His path-breaking theorizing and that of Marshall McLuhan, who built on his work, qualifies both of them as public intellectuals, for they helped Canadians and others to understand themselves and their society.

Where do Canadians stand among those considered the leading global public intellectuals today? This is a matter of promotion as well as discriminating taste. Sorties in classification are perilous and inevitably flawed, but they reflect a growing demand to make available relevant informed learning in an increasingly global knowledge society. A list of the world's "top 100 current public intellectuals" selected by editors of *Foreign Policy* magazine in 2005 and 2008 transcended a nation-based approach, but revealed the journal's own bias: a disproportionate number of those it listed had contributed to its pages.⁵ Asked by the magazine to weigh in on their choices via the Internet, many respondents succumbed to organized campaigns; in 2008 they voted ten Muslims

as the world's top ten public intellectuals.⁶ Some on *Foreign Policy's* list, such as Christopher Hitchens, advertised themselves and offered links on their websites to facilitate voting for them. Partisans of others, such as Michael Ignatieff, solicited votes on their behalf.

Five persons somehow linked to Canada appeared on *Foreign Policy's* 2008 list. Two, pop sociologist and journalist Malcolm Gladwell (slapped down by Mark Kingwell in his contribution here) and Harvard linguist and experimental psychologist Steven Pinker, were listed as "Canada/United States." Another, theoretical physicist Lee Smolin (who came to Canada in 2001), is recorded as "United States/Canada." The other two Canadians on the list, philosopher Charles Taylor and Ignatieff, appeared as unhyphenated Canadians, although Ignatieff had lived longer outside of Canada than in it. As evidence of the fickle nature of determining the reputations of public intellectuals, Canadian Naomi Klein, who was listed fifth in *Foreign Policy's* 2005 inventory and whose book *No Logo*⁷ became a manifesto of the anti-corporate globalization movement (and to whom Sylvia Bashevkin draws particular attention in this collection), was absent from the magazine's 2008 list.

This book brings together a wide range of exceptional figures, some of Canada's most thoughtful, knowledgeable, and prominent contemporary public intellectuals, both academics and non-academics. Original thinkers with inventive ideas, their voices are rich, their perspectives diverse. The result is an idiosyncratic eccentric compilation, surprisingly and invitingly eclectic. The thread that binds the various issues addressed – from underpopulation and Aboriginal policy to the travails of ethicists and the impact of economists, to the roles of pollsters, political actors, pundits, and social activists – is the place of the public intellectual in Canadian society. Some contributors assume the mantle of the public intellectual, others hesitate to adopt it, and most are content to identify the work of public intellectuals, what they do and who they are. With verve and panache, the authors meditate in one way or another on the role of the public intellectual and his societal responsibilities.

This book appears at a time of revolutionary change in the arenas available to public intellectuals and their audiences for public thought. In today's brave new technological world, where the electronic systems and digital products of modern communications such as the Internet permit anyone to publish widely and scream loudly, public intellectuals continue to serve as salutary antidotes to the simplification and trivialization of public debate. The authors of the essays here reflect

on how well public intellectuals fare in Canada, on the functions they fulfil, and on how the conditions and forums for the widespread public debate of ideas might be improved.

Some essays offer highly personal insights and accounts; others present empirical scholarly studies. Together the essays touch on intellectual history, the sociology of knowledge, philosophy, and public policy. Issues addressed include the media as filters of public thought, the changing university environment, advocacy, influence in public policy, and the rise of think tanks.

These essays cover social and political thought more comprehensively than science and culture. From the world of science, only metallurgist Ursula Franklin receives sustained treatment (in Bashevkin's essay) although Franklin and other scientists such as Suzuki, Nobel Prize-winning chemist John Polanyi, neurosurgeon Wilder Penfield, and those associated with the Pugwash Institute, for example, have certainly given an ethical or political cast to their public interventions. Many outstanding figures from the world of literature, such as novelists Atwood and Mordecai Richler and literary critic Northrop Frye, who appear only fleetingly in these essays, also indisputably qualify as public intellectuals.

The figures that appear in these essays are but a sampling of those who could have appeared. One could list many more of Canada's distinguished men and women of letters who are not referred to, including Robertson Davies, Al Purdy, Roch Carrier, and poet Dorothy Livesay, a two-time winner of the Governor General's Award who exhibited a life-long concern for women's issues and rights. From the worlds of art and music, those not mentioned include the eccentric and brilliant colourist Greg Curnoe, known for his hyperbolic anti-Americanism outbursts, and Bruce Cockburn, whose passionate devotion to human rights found expression in *If I Had a Rocket Launcher*, inspired by his visit to a Guatemalan refugee camp in Mexico. An unmentioned and generally unheralded Canadian whose primary public arena was global is John Humphrey, who penned a draft of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, dubbed by Eleanor Roosevelt as "the international Magna Carta of all mankind."⁸

The relative absence of women voices (four of sixteen) in this collection speaks to the historical inability of women to claim equal space and attention in public forums. Women have faced daunting cultural and social barriers and their participation will continue to be underplayed if only issues traditionally considered properly in the public

sphere, as opposed to those deemed personal and private, define the work of public intellectuals. Equal Voice, an organization which has attracted media attention with its mission to promote the election of more women to all levels of government, focuses on the political because it believes the election of more women will produce public policies more sensitive to women's concerns. Paradoxically, as the women's movement has declined, more women have gained recognition for their contributions as public intellectuals.

The all-star cast of contributors in this collection is a truly impressive assembly. Many are widely known and will be familiar to the reader. All of them have influenced public affairs in Canada as doers as well as thinkers and they span the ideological spectrum. With them, we explore and examine the place of the public intellectual in the context of a rapidly changing and diverse Canadian society in an increasingly interdependent world.

NOTES

- 1 David Suzuki, email to author, 10 Aug. 2009; Denys Arcand, letter to author, 9 Sept. 2009; Michael Adams, email to author, 9 Sept. 2009; and Conrad Black, emails to author, 31 July and 3 Aug. 2009.
- 2 Philip Resnick, *The European Roots of Canadian Identity* (Peterborough: Broadview, 2005), Edgar Z. Friedenberg, *Deference to Authority: The Case of Canada* (White Plains, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1980), and Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966).
- 3 Andrew Chung, "Tout le monde en parle," *Toronto Star*, 29 Sept. 2008, <http://thestar.blogs.com/notebook/2008/09/liberal-party-1.html>, and "Charest in hot seat on TV talk show," *Toronto Star*, 6 Dec. 2010, p. A8.
- 4 Citizenship and Immigration Canada, *Discover Canada: The Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship* (Ottawa: Minister of Public Works and Government Services, 2009), 26.
- 5 Accessed 29 Dec. 2009.
- 6 "Survey says world's top 10 intellectuals are Muslims," *Reuters*, <http://blogs.reuters.com/faithworld/2008/06/25/survey-says-worlds-top-10-intellectuals-are-muslims/>.
- 7 Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (London: Flamingo, 2000).
- 8 Henry J. Steiner, Philip Alston, and Ryan Goodman, *International Human Rights in Context: Law, Politics, Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 146.

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PART ONE

What Are Public Intellectuals For?

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1 The Public Intellectual and the Democratic Conversation

JANICE GROSS STEIN

1. A “Public Intellectual”?

A friend recently introduced me to a colleague whom he described as a “serious public intellectual.” Pausing for a moment, he then went on to say, “And I mean that as a compliment.” I was puzzled. What was he suggesting? Was it insulting to be described as a public intellectual?

As a polite Canadian, I did not pursue the issue there and then, but the comment niggled. Is “public” the troubling part of the description? Is it acceptable to be a private intellectual, engaging in the life of the mind behind closed doors where prying eyes cannot see? Or is it that “intellectual” is an unflattering category, laden with subtle meanings that become apparent when we examine it in the light of popular culture, however we understand that term. Or possibly, could this be a particularly Canadian issue, a discomfort with any public display of prowess, one more instance of the “tall poppy” syndrome that some commentators charge bedevils Canada.

I understand the term “intellectual” to refer to someone who uses her intellect. That is, however, an obviously tautological statement. What does it mean to use one’s intellect? It means to draw on reason and analysis to put arguments forward. The trouble with this definition, of course, is that it encompasses almost everyone. Farmers use reason and analysis to make arguments about what is appropriate to plant and when it is appropriate to harvest. Physicians use reason and analysis to diagnose patients and recommend treatments. Lawyers use reason and analysis to defend their clients within a publicly constituted legal framework. Virtually every skilled problem solver uses reason and analysis in many different ways in their lives, regardless of what else they might do. Clearly, there is more to being an intellectual than the

use of reason and argument. But what? What sets the intellectual apart from other reasoning and thoughtful people?

An intellectual may be someone who devotes her life to the search for truth, who uses her power of reason and analysis to strip away falsehood and clarify and illuminate what is true. This understanding of the intellectual does not take us much farther. Scientists of all kinds search for truth in their laboratories, in the field, in the research that they do. Physicists seek to know the universe, its deep and underlying truths that are hidden from the naked eye. Sociologists seek to understand why societies are stable and why they change. In my own field, scholars have tried for the last two millennia to understand the causes of war. Yet we generally do not think of these truth seekers as intellectuals. We call them scientists, researchers, social scientists, philosophers, or even scholars, but the search for truth for its own sake does not seem to be the defining attribute of an intellectual. What then?

I suspect that we reserve the term “intellectual” for someone who plays with abstract ideas for the sheer fun of it. Like jugglers, intellectuals initially have no ulterior motive other than to play with concepts and abstractions, for the pleasure that it gives. Like artists who are driven to make art, even when no one appreciates what they create, intellectuals may have no instrumental purpose other than to enjoy and enhance the elegance of ideas. Unlike the stereotype, then, intellectuals are not generally desiccated people. On the contrary, they are passionate about ideas. No matter how disciplined and meticulous they are in the making of their arguments, when they argue they do so with feeling, at times mesmerized by the beauty of the idea, dazzled by the elegance of the argument. Intellectuals are creatures of both reason and passion and the two are inseparable. Indeed, the newest research in neuroscience tells us convincingly that without emotion, we cannot reason. The two are not opposites, as philosophers long argued, but integral one to the other.

If I am right, it is no shabby thing to be an intellectual, to be passionate about thinking and reasoning, about abstract ideas and concepts. No apologies necessary. Much follows, however, from this description of intellectuals as passionate thinkers.

If the argument that intellectuals are passionate thinkers bears thinking about, then it is the passion that pushes intellectuals to share the excitement of their ideas with others. Like artists, they want to communicate their vision, their understanding of the world. They want others to read what they write, to hear what they are saying, to understand

what they understand. Michael Cunningham, a writer of fiction, rejected the myth that writers write for themselves and described his ongoing mental dialogue with his readers. There is always a reader with him, he insisted, even if the reader is only in his imagination. In this sense, intellectual activity is not a private activity for long. The life of the mind is intensely personal and passionate, but sooner or later spills over and becomes a public activity. Intellectuals need an interlocutor, even if that interlocutor is imaginary. The passion drives the ideas and the arguments out into the world, at times even before these ideas are ready to be born.

My interest is in a subspecies of these intellectuals, those who believe in the possibility of dialogue with the public. Working within a democratic tradition, they are committed to an informed and engaged citizenry. Indeed, they believe that only if citizens are informed and knowledgeable about the issues can democratic debate flourish and democracy be deepened. It is their commitment to engagement with the public that justifies the term “public intellectual.”

2. Public Intellectuals and the Democratic Conversation

A thinker’s commitment to engagement with the public is somewhat different from one who seeks truth for its own sake. Scientists who seek truth, for example, who do research, are not always driven to communicate that truth to the public in their societies. They are not because the knowledge they create will often not be used directly by citizens themselves, but by others who are intermediaries between the scientist and the citizen. Some kinds of knowledge, moreover, are especially abstract or technical and extraordinarily difficult to communicate in a meaningful way. The field of quantum information, for example, is much more difficult to speak about with a group of citizens than are some of the acute dilemmas that bioethicists have explored. People experience and live these bioethical dilemmas – end of life care, euthanasia, genetic engineering – and are often open, at times eager, to join in public conversation about these issues. They want the opportunity to learn and to argue.

Certainly some subjects are inherently very difficult technically and require advanced levels of expertise to comprehend. But I argue that generally as a society we are failing to engage and that we need to find new and imaginative ways to do so if our democracy is to flourish. To this process of democratic engagement, I argue, intellectuals must contribute.

3. Obstacles to Public Conversation

Critics currently bemoan the state of debate in contemporary democratic societies. They write of the “dumbing down” of public discussion, the growing presence of the quick quip and the superficial sound bite, and the rise of demagogues who dominate talk radio shows and the blogospheres. All of these, they argue, are a threat to the quality of our democratic life. Without a well-informed citizenry, vigorously debating the future, our democratic institutions atrophy, becoming the preserve of a political class and privileged elites. Our public space empties out and private interest replaces public concerns and a shared sense of a common future and the collective good.

This, of course, is not a new concern. In ancient times, when democracy was direct and intimate, philosophers still worried about the quality of public debate. Roman leaders put on circuses to distract restless publics from the issues of collective concern. It is not unusual, therefore, that each generation worries anew about the quality of conversation in public space. That is as it should be.

If we are worrying more than usual at this moment, if we are bemoaning hyper partisanship, superficial debate, and sound bites that displace serious, substantive conversation, we have good reason. Several trends have converged to debase the quality of public debate in our democratic lives.

Foremost among these is the revolution in communication technologies and the creation of digital public space. In the early, heady days of the nineties, democratic theorists held out great hope that the new technologies would build a platform for a new kind of civic engagement, for a public discussion which would be wide-ranging and open to everyone. The possibilities were limited only by the cost of a computer and the availability of a connection. In retrospect, this hope was overwhelmingly naive and impossibly optimistic. Revolutionary changes in technology, as they always have and always will, enabled new kinds of communication, some of it very good but some of it deeply discouraging. From the perspective of civic engagement and public conversation, the most important consequence was the levelling effect on knowledge, reasoning, and argument.

In the Internet era, the age of Twitter and blogs, everyone who writes is an instant expert. The distinction between disciplined knowledge and opinion is elided and, indeed, at times disappears. Every one’s opinion is of equal merit and there are very limited ways to distinguish

the deeply knowledgeable, the well-informed, from those who simply have opinions. The sceptic may well interrupt at precisely this moment and say, with some aggravation: This sounds like a rationalization for an unhealthy elitism, a defence of the intellectual steeped in knowledge and practised at reasoning from the true hero or heroine of this story, the democratic citizen. We have long ago abandoned the fantasy of the philosopher king, if we ever had it at all.

This, I respond, is a fundamental misreading of the most basic processes of democratic society. All opinions are equal when we come together to choose our leaders, when we exercise our most basic democratic rights at the ballot box. Knowledge, argument, and reason do not have special prerogative or special privilege on voting day, nor should they. Any such contention would indeed be elitism, rightly suspect and discredited by citizens. The question I am asking is, rather: how are opinion of citizens formed before voting day? What opportunities do they have to learn about the issues that are most important to them?

This is not a trivial question. As our societies have become more globalized and more specialized, it has becoming increasingly challenging for citizens to navigate their way through a rich, but noisy and confusing, environment. Standard and familiar places to go – the local newspapers, for example, and public broadcasters – have become increasingly fragile as they compete for attention and resources in our multimedia digital environment.

The benefits of this hyper active, rich, multimedia digital universe are well known. As citizens, we can find what we want, when we want it, and how we want it. We range far and wide, download what appeals, and read, watch, or listen when it is convenient. A new, wonderfully rich world is open to all of us, there for the asking, except in the growing number of societies where governments now rigorously control and limit access to the digital universe.

This rosy picture is, of course, not the whole story, not even in democratic societies where access to the digital world is unimpeded. Print and electronic media compete for the attention of the public in a hyper-competitive environment. In this world, traditional media are being squeezed financially. Newspapers in Canada, for example, have reduced their foreign correspondents over the last decade and, counter-intuitively, generally pay less attention to global issues than they did a decade ago. More space – and resources – are devoted to human interest stories, to lifestyle sections, and to stories designed to attract younger readers who have largely left the print world behind for the

digital world. With a few outstanding exceptions, such as the *Globe and Mail*, our newspapers are no longer the essential resource for engagement on civic issues that they once were.

Nowhere is this change more evident than in our public broadcaster. In the last few years, leadership at the CBC has set as their top priority to increase their audience share. In their flagship news programs, they have shortened the length of news items, reduced the coverage of international issues, cut the number of foreign correspondents, introduced glitzy graphics and snippet items that flash on and off the screen, and quickened the pace of items to produce a faster-moving program for viewers who are used to multitasking and tweeting in 140 characters or less. All this to appeal to easily distracted people living in a noisy, fractious, crowded, busy environment.

Surprisingly, these changes at the CBC provoked significant controversy. That they did is encouraging, for it suggested that there was still a constituency that cared about the public broadcaster, that believed that it had a special role in civic education that private broadcasters would not fill. These loyalists decried the deliberate “dumbing down” of news and current affairs by the leadership of the CBC to increase its viewership, the subtext of many of the changes.

I am one of those who mourned the loss of the CBC radio that I treasured, was profoundly aggrieved by the debasement of the talented CBC news team, who were forced into an awkward and at times silly framework, and deeply regretted the shrinking of shared space that the CBC historically has provided for public discussion. It is with no *Schadenfreude*, therefore, that I read that the readership of the *Globe and Mail*, which by and large refused to compromise on the quality of its content, has increased. By contrast, at the CBC, which provided video snippets to attract the video generation, the viewership has declined. These asymmetrical results are momentarily comforting for people who are concerned about the shrinking space for civic engagement.

This new digital world generally contributes to the shrinking of shared space for civic engagement. Digital technology enables division of space into ever smaller and smaller slices. No longer do citizens gather around their radios to listen to the same broadcast, as they once did, nor do they watch the same newscasts on their televisions, as they once did. There is less and less shared conversation around the water cooler about something people all saw or read the night before. Now it is about a two-minute video that went “viral” on YouTube. This makes it more difficult to have a conversation about common issues,

even when we differ in perspectives. If we are not reading, listening, or watching the same content, we have less and less to talk about together.

The story becomes even more difficult if we believe the evidence that people increasingly read newspapers that agree with their views, watch television shows on networks that affirm their pre-existing beliefs, and go to websites of like-minded people. As public space fractures and choice multiplies, conversations become less, not more, diverse. In the most pessimistic account, conversations no longer involve the exchange of ideas and a discussion of differences, but rather a gathering of the faithful to exchange views with others who think like they do. When the faithful gather, attitudes are reinforced rather than challenged. Thinking congeals. The opportunities for education through the discussion of differences become fewer and fewer and the voices more shrill. When there is little opportunity to bridge differences, this shrillness puts democratic debate and discussion at risk.

It is no accident that we are seeing a dramatic increase in partisanship, an inability to reach across the aisle, to bridge differences and find political compromise on important policy issues. On the contrary, debates are becoming vitriolic, laced with personal attacks, burdened with stereotypes. This hyper-partisanship is visible not only in the parliament of Canada, but also in the Congress of the United States and in the parliaments of Europe. As the capacity of the traditional “aggregators” – our media, our political parties – recedes and is replaced by a splintered digital world, political parties are finding it harder and harder to bridge differences and broker compromises, to grease the wheels of democratic processes. Collecting and bridging differences – aggregation – is essential to the smooth functioning of any democracy, and it is precisely this function which is being put at risk. It can hardly be a coincidence that we are seeing increasing partisanship as the media have splintered and lost their role of creating shared space for political discussion.

To this toxic stew we add the final element, the loss of respect for politicians and the progressive alienation of citizens from the political process. Citizens who listen to the vitriol and watch the antics of our elected representatives are disgusted by the partisanship, dismayed by the stereotyping, disheartened by the poor quality of debate and discussion, and disquieted by the lack of attention to serious challenges. It is no surprise that citizens are increasingly suspicious of the motives of politicians and distrustful of the leaders whom they elect. Most citizens no longer regard political life as honourable, and that is a sad commentary on our democratic societies.

The increasing vitriol amidst the partisanship of public debate, and the emergence of “infotainment” as a substitute for serious talk, shrink the space for democratic governance. If these trends deepen, democratic societies will not get the governments that we deserve. It is in this context that I explore a possible role for public intellectuals in pushing back against these trends, in broadening, even marginally, the space for civic engagement.

4. The Obstacles to a Role for the Public Intellectual

Why privilege any role at all for a public intellectual in this crisis of democracy? To put it bluntly, why place any confidence in people who live a life of the mind, who like to play with abstractions. As Mark Kingwell rightly points out in this volume, public intellectuals are subject to the same temptations and foibles as their fellow citizens. They can be vainglorious, enthralled by the sound of their own voices, attention seekers who are flattered by the attention that they receive. They can be co-opted by those in power, seduced by fame or benefits. They can succumb to the temptation of fifteen minutes of fame and, as Tom Flanagan notes, get drawn into sixty-second interviews on television, becoming advocates for partisan causes rather than interpreters of complex problems. They can use their intellect to debate rather than to consider, to quip rather than to analyse, to insult rather than to assess. Public intellectuals, in other words, are human, with all the temptations, foibles, and weakness of will that human beings struggle with all the time.

When public intellectuals succumb to these temptations, as some most certainly do some of the time, they abuse the authority that they implicitly carry as “thinkers.” The risk of this kind of abuse merits a well-deserved caution to avoid elevating public intellectuals to a position of authority that they do not merit.

This kind of risk, however, applies to almost any category of human activity. Clerics have abused their religious authority. Some physicians have been known to abuse their authority in their dealings with patients, as have lawyers in their dealing with clients. Athletes, scientists, judges, artists can all misbehave at times and yet all engage with the public in different ways at different times. It makes no sense, then, to hold public intellectuals to a unique standard, one that is higher than any other group that has obligations to the public. It equally makes