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ARTICLE

Networks of the dead or alive in cyberspace: public intellectuals in the mass and internet media

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Abstract

This article addresses whether dead public intellectuals differ from living public intellectuals in terms of their social network properties in the mass and internet media. Explicated at the theoretical level is the macro-level asynchrony of the web, moving beyond micro-level conceptualizations. Networks for 662 actors which Posner defined as public intellectuals are analyzed based on data from Nexis for magazines, newspapers and broadcast media, and on the web through Google and Google Groups. The differences between the media profiles of dead and living public intellectuals are assessed. As hypothesized, there are no significant differences between living and dead public intellectuals in hits for webpages and for Google Groups threadedness. Also, mass media hits show a significantly higher frequency for the living. Findings show that dead public intellectuals have a social 'afterlife', a sociomorphic quality that continues in cyberspace and not in other media.

Key words

discussion lists • internet • mass media • public intellectuals • social networks • threads • threadedness • Usenet • web

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INTRODUCTION

Public intellectuals have been defined as individuals who assert themselves as authorities on political and social affairs. Russell Jacoby defines the public intellectual as an individual committed 'not simply to a professional or private domain but to a public world – and a public language, the vernacular' (1987: 235). Richard Posner refers to public intellectuals as 'intellectuals who opine to an educated public on questions of or inflected by a political or ideological concern' (2001: 2). As with Jacoby and Posner, discussion of the public intellectual role has focused frequently on the importance of a public intellectual's independence from institutions and their ability to float freely in social space, an understanding of the intellectual that was expressed clearly by Karl Mannheim (1936), and which has been picked up by many more recent commentators on intellectuals. Unfortunately, this emphasis on the lack of connections to the rest of the world has meant that we have had little discussion on the kinds of societal connections that public intellectuals can have.

   This article approaches the issue of public intellectuals with a concern for how public intellectuals connect to the world. The existing debate about public intellectuals links up with a number of theoretical standpoints regarding the way in which intellectuals relate to society and the media. Antonio Gramsci (1971) looms particularly large in these discussions. Gramsci's categories of 'traditional' and 'organic' intellectuals, and his emphasis on the media, have raised a number of questions relevant to the study of intellectuals. Like Gramsci, Karl Popper envisioned an active role for intellectuals. Popper chided other academics for their navel-gazing proclivities, arguing that: 'Self-analysis is no substitute for those practical actions which are necessary for establishing the democratic institutions which alone can guarantee the freedom of critical thought and the progress of science' (1950: 409). Jurgen Habermas' (1984, 1989) ideas concerning the public sphere and the theory of communicative action also rely on an implicit understanding of something very much like an active intellectual role. Among these theorists (and many others) the emphasis is placed quite rightly on the potential functions of intellectuals in society.

   Whereas discussions of intellectuals more broadly take many different forms, the term 'public intellectual' often carries with it a narrative of decline. The notion of decline figures prominently in the work of many of those who address the situation of the public intellectual. C. Wright Mills coined the term 'public intellectual' (1958: 135) when outlining an active role for intellectuals during the Cold War. Almost 30 years later, Russell Jacoby's book *The Last Intellectuals* (1987) reintroduced the term. Jacoby argued that intellectuals that communicate with a broad audience were becoming a thing of the past. One of his arguments is that public intellectuals are disappearing

because the academic professions turn would-be public intellectuals into professors who communicate almost entirely with each other, leaving the public behind. The 'last intellectuals' of his title are the generation of intellectuals from the mid-20th century who wrote for a broad audience. As these figures age and die, he claims, we see the passing of a generation, and perhaps the disappearance of the public intellectual. Jacoby is not the only writer to point to this cohort of mid-20th-century intellectuals. Other authors (e.g. Bender, 1993; Wald, 1987) have lamented the passing of this generation. Subsequent work by Richard Posner (2001) also notes a decline in public intellectuals, although Posner argues that there has been a decline in quality, not quantity.

The narrative of decline on public intellectuals suggests that they were once more plentiful or more worthy of our attention. If filtered through a more nuanced understanding of the properties of the media through which public intellectuals receive exposure, the narrative of decline can be challenged. One such challenge can follow from the oft-invoked association of the internet with novel social formations, which informs many commentators who argue that the internet will create a new breed of public intellectuals. Steven Johnson, founder of the now-defunct *Feed* magazine (www.feedmag.com), described the rise of a new cohort of public intellectuals as one of 'the really progressive and important things that [is] happening because of the rise of the web' (in Donatich et al., 2001: 32). In a similar manner, some individuals describe the relatively new phenomenon of news and politics-oriented weblogs (blogs) as a sign that the internet will provide a home for a new, younger generation of public intellectuals.

Additionally, less self-interested predictions of the internet's value to public culture can be found. Many theorists have evaluated the internet's potential to provide a new home for the public sphere (e.g. Dahlberg, 2001; Dahlgren, 2000; Papacharissi, 2002). Among the many changes that these theorists consider is the idea that, through the use of discussion groups and other internet media, individual citizens can play a greater public role in the dissemination and discussion of public issues, in effect becoming their own public intellectuals.

If the internet does not produce a new cadre of public intellectuals, online chat and discussion boards may allow for spontaneous discussion of pre-existing public intellectuals, perhaps even enhancing the quality of political discussion. A concern for the quality of online political interaction has been well established already, with many concluding that the online environment does not lead participants to substantive debate. Charles White describes how 'much of what passes for political discussion [online] can be compared to two teenage siblings in the heat of argument' (1997: 27). Stephen Doheny-Farina (1996) and Richard Davis (1999) express doubts about the internet's

potential for fostering political debate, citing concerns that the internet is too speedy for deliberation and that online posts frequently lack evidence. More recently, Weger and Aakhus (2003) have found that political chatroom interactions lack adherence to the classic rules of argumentation. However, argumentation is not the only way to operationalize the quality of online political interaction. For example, Hill and Hughes find Usenet threads to be packed with information; they point out that 'over half of all threads are about long-standing issues or events well in the past and sometimes in the future' (1998: 60–1). Building on this, we suggest that references to public intellectuals could be one kind of information that lends substance to online political discussion, and that this can be observed in part by the extent to which online discussions focus on the ideas associated with the names of public intellectuals. Public intellectuals' names need not be present much in a relevant discussion thread. The ideas can comprise virtually all of the content, as long as the name is mentioned at least once in one post in the thread. Such discussions can be captured automatically as long as one of the posts in the thread contains the name. Thread length is a measure of the discussion–generating power of the public intellectual, what we call 'sociomorphic' character. Therefore, it is one limited measure of the quality of discussion content, in that the longer a discussion unfolds, the better it is for the social community, assuming that to some extent the length of public discourse is desirable, regardless of its specific content (Habermas, 1984, 1989; Popper, 1950). The present research seeks to determine whether there are differences across media in the presence of public intellectuals. Once this may be empirically established, analysis of message content would be the next move in future research.

One of the initial concerns of the study was with mapping some aspects of social network structures among the participants in discussion lists associated with public intellectuals. Some kinds of social network structures can be measured through automatic analysis of discussion lists without analyzing the content of the messages themselves. An example is the work of Kang and Choi (1999), who measured the network constituted by 45 internationally focused Usenet discussion lists by measuring the extent of cross-posting of international news stories to the lists and inputting these data to social network analysis tools. When a message was posted to two or more groups, each of them was indexed as having a link. When aggregated across many posts and discussion forums, the social network structure among the forums is represented and its structural properties can be measured. Similarly, Cho and Danowski (2002) measured the network structure of cross-cultural communication in culture-oriented Usenet lists by indexing the cross-posting of messages across them.

As the bridge between the people and formal institutions of government, civil society constitutes the broad network reach within which public

intellectuals function. Just as offline civil society actors provide the bridging that enables democratic discourse among social groups and governmental institutions, online linkages to websites and discussion threads about public intellectuals and public policy concepts provide the parallel civil society of cyberspace. At the theoretical level it is suggested that the fundamental process of social linkage is of the same nature in both offline and online domains (Danowski, 2004).

The possibility that dead public intellectuals will be replaced with new public intellectuals who are sustained through internet-based communication is only one way to challenge the narrative of public intellectual decline. It is also possible for the internet to lend itself to the re-establishment of dead public intellectuals and their continued sociomorphic character, their ability to coalesce social actors around them and their ideas. First, this article will contemplate how such a mediated resurrection is not as far-fetched as it may sound.

The passing of the 'last intellectuals' need not mean the disappearance of the ideas from that generation. There is much scholarship dedicated to the perseverance of intellectual and literary reputation. Much of this work focuses on how reputation can survive or wither away as a function of the social networks and institutions that step in to support a figure after their death (e.g. Lang and Lang, 1988; Tuchman and Fortin, 1989). In fact, death itself can be seen as a positive career move for many artists and celebrities. As Eric Rothenbuhler's recent writing on blues musician Robert Johnson has demonstrated, a public figure's death can be just the beginning of a career. Robert Johnson fits the interests of many complementary groups – record labels, critics, other musicians, the blues audience – in a manner which has led to record sales of his music 50 years after his death (Rothenbuhler, 2005). George Orwell also became a superstar after his death, as figures from all sides of the political spectrum claimed him as their own in the latter 20th century (Rodden, 1989). If, as Jacoby and others suggest, our greatest generation of public intellectuals has died, attention to new media processes leads us to believe that we may not be done with them yet.

When applied to the situation of the public intellectual on the internet, this concern for after-death careers of public figures would suggest that we may see the internet becoming a new home for dead public intellectuals. This approach focuses on the internet's capabilities as a storage medium that relates differently to time than the print and broadcast media more commonly dealt with in the existing literature on intellectuals.

Compared to the traditional mass media of television, radio, newspapers, magazines and film, the internet is different in its treatment of content over time. Once traditional mass media content passes through the present time window of the medium, it is effectively gone. To gain access to old mass

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media content, one must access the archives of the media that are housed separately from the main mass media system. With the internet there is more storage of message content over time within the medium itself, so that one need not leave as readily the medium and access some other storage system. The content to varying degrees is allowed to age within the medium. The old content that is most available is Usenet discussion groups, now managed by Google Groups. Messages from as far back as 1981 are accessible. Although less consistently available, webpages are allowed to age as long as the individuals or organizations wish to maintain them. However, there is no automatic archiving of most webpages. When their maintainers chose to remove them from the web, they are gone from public accessibility. Nevertheless, the time window for access to content produced in the past is wider for the internet than it is for other media. This storage and access feature, particularly of Google Group discussions, would appear to render the internet particularly rich among media for the afterlife of public intellectuals.

SOCIOMORPHIC QUALITY OF PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS IN DIFFERENT MEDIA

When theorizing about social actors, their ideas and the social interactions that develop around them, it is useful to define a concept that captures these notions: sociomorphism. In the broadest sense, to be sociomorphic is to create or shape social form. A useful way to conceptualize social form is in terms of social networks, in which individuals are nodes and their communication constitutes links. A person high in sociomorphism facilitates the emergence and maintenance of richer social network structures. Additionally, a concept is more sociomorphic to the extent that more extensive social networks emerge through the discussion of the concept. At the same time, media vary in their sociomorphic properties, in their ability to create and sustain social networks. For example, the mass medium of television often has been thought to facilitate less social network interaction than other forms of communication (see for example, Galston, 2000; Putnam, 2000; Thompson, 1995). In short, it could be said that social actors, message content and media have varying sociomorphic qualities.

ASSUMPTIONS

This article assumes that public intellectuals function as focal points for discussion, whose presence helps to sustain the social networks concerned with the ideas that they impart. They are associated with varying amounts of social network activity surrounding them or the volume of public discussion about their ideas. In this sense, public intellectuals are not in charge of the discourse around them. Rather, they serve as agents selected by members of a social community around which to focus a discussion of the intellectual's

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ideas. Thus, being a productive public intellectual is a quality that emerges at the intersection of the public intellectual's work and the actions of the members of an informal social community.

This is in contrast to the traditional view of public intellectuals who become known as such by some process of public anointing administered by established public intellectuals citing their work as they participate in traditional media. Here, the creation of a public intellectual requires the aspirant's personal effort coupled with public judgement by members of the quasi-formal college of intellectuals who convene their deliberations in the media. This self-promotional approach certainly still exists online, as evidenced by a new generation of 'wired' public intellectuals such as Nicholas Negroponte, Dave Winer and a host of prominent bloggers. However, online communication also calls attention to a more bi-directional social agency in the maintenance of public intellectuals. Public intellectuals become focal points of discussion in online forums, and in this sense they constitute, and are constituted by, online social networks.

Macro-level asynchrony of the web

It is a common conception that the internet involves various forms of asynchronous communication, where the sender and receiver of messages do not share the same time for an interaction, such as with email, web browsing and discussion lists. Although synchronous forms of internet-based communication exist, on the whole the internet is characterized most often as an asynchronous medium, perhaps in terms of both its capabilities and its dominant use, email.

Observers have defined this concept of asynchrony primarily at micro-levels of analysis including individuals, dyads and groups. The fundamental social unit creating the web content may be an organization, group or individual, while the individual is typically the social unit accessing the content and perhaps providing information back to the website by clicking on links, entering comments or responding to online questions. At the dyadic level the primary example of asynchrony is email. At the group level, discussion lists are asynchronous (see An and Frick, 2006; Rogers, 1986).

We assert that these largely micro-level asynchronies are connected to a broader asynchrony found more widely across the internet, as is suggested by some considerations of web-based communication (e.g. Mitra and Cohen, 1999). In this sense, the internet can be seen as a kind of storage medium. One implication of micro-level asynchrony for macro features of the medium is that time becomes externalized from the communication process. Time is made exogenous in the time-marking of messages, such as in email or discussion post headers (Danowski, 1993a). Thus it no longer has a binding quality on the users, as it would in real-time interactions.

At the macro–level, this removal of time as a content-binding feature and its placement on the external envelope of the content renders the web on the whole a rather timeless medium. As time is relatively peripheral to content, it is judged less according to its timeliness relative to the time of user access, and more based on the relevance of the content to user needs and wants. Nevertheless, time explicitness in such media is not completely absent. Different content has varying life cycles. For example, news has a shorter life cycle than frequently asked questions (FAQs). The comments that users post about internet material can vary in useful life cycle depending on what prompted the comment and the time-transcendence of the comments themselves. Nevertheless, the internet is generally more time-independent compared to traditional media. With time less significant, generally internet-based media do not employ content maintenance procedures that systematically check the time of message content creation or access, and use this as a criterion for discarding 'old' content. In contrast, with traditional synchronous media – broadcast television, radio, magazines and newspapers – it is typical to define the previous day's content as 'old' and of considerably diminished value. This article hypothesizes that because of these processes, living and dead public intellectuals will have no difference in presence on the web, while they will in the traditional synchronous mass media where the living are favored.

This relative lack of time-binding of content on the web and of participants creates a macro-level feature where time floats relatively freely from social constructions. Content grows in size and in its interrelationships through the creation of links made largely independent of time. The fracturing, externalization and peripheralizing of the time dimension on the web is consistent with a postmodern perspective that places central attention on narrative structures rather than on the elements of a communication process. This encourages the telling and retelling of narratives and the drawing of different interpretations based on the social participants' conceptual constructions, with no single interpretation or metanarrative privileged. The linearity of time and progress in the modern culture is rejected in favor of a non–linear trajectory that may link with content in a singularly unique manner each time a social actor may project themself into the body of accumulated content. This macro–level view gives a theoretical rationale to account for differences in the time-binding and relevance of pools of available content in various media.

Media and public intellectuals

The importance of the media to public intellectuals can be understood in part through an exploration of the varying sociomorphic qualities of different media, as well as their varying time signatures. Specifically, internet–based

media enable greater sociomorphic development than broadcast and print-based mass media.

For these reasons, this article hypothesizes that public intellectuals have more of a presence on the internet than in the traditional mass media. If public intellectuals are squeezed out of the traditional media into the internet media, one would expect that dead public intellectuals would receive less attention in the squeezing media. Because of the internet's relative absence of time and space determinants of discourse, one would expect dead public intellectuals to be more present on the internet than they are in the traditional media, as well as there being more presence of living public intellectuals on the internet. With time removed as a determinant of the presence of content, it is expected that the dead will be sociomorphically no different than the living on the web. In short, the dead are expected to have an 'afterlife' that is as rich as the life of living public intellectuals.

Individual, media, message and social network effects

It is assumed that the public discourse that mentions public intellectuals is influenced by medium characteristics and influences a range of variables, including, but not limited to: personal characteristics, prior message content about relevant topics, and the social network structures of the discourse community. The various media and their discourse network structures are investigated in this study. As previously discussed, another focus of the present author's work has been about how internet-based media relate to time and what this may mean in terms of the sociomorphic power that living and dead public intellectuals have to sustain social networks related to their ideas.

Network degree

Monge and Contractor (2003) discuss the social network concept of degree, which is a measure of the number of links between social actors. Indegree is the number of directed links from other actors to a particular actor. Outdegree is the number of links that originate with an actor to other actors in the network.

Taking network concepts into the media domain, this article introduces 'first-order', 'second-order' and 'third-order' degree. First-order degree is the strongest kind of network linkage in mediated information. One type occurs as actors mention each other in a blog post, discussion forum or webpage. It is an explicit reciprocal tie. When one social actor mentions another, but the other in turn does not mention the first actor, it is an unreciprocated directed social tie. Another kind of first-order degree occurs when an actor posts content and someone else posts a link to it on a webpage or blog, or responds to the post in a discussion forum. Additionally, even if the actors

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do not mention each other explicitly by name, each time a message posted receives an explicit reply, there is a type of indirect first-order degree link created between the originator and the respondent. The message pairs define the social network links (Danowski, 1982). So, chains of direct first-order degree lengthen as more actors post comments to threads in which they name the original actor who started the thread. Alternatively, the researcher may define indirect first-order degree links as the series of posts and replies by identifiable social actors. For example, the co-presence of social actors in a blog series would be treated by social network researchers as a two-mode network relationship.

Another form of first-order degree network defined by message content is Monge and Eisenberg's (1987) notion of semantic networks, in which they link social actors that share similar symbolic content. For example, one might ask internet community members what the goals of the community are, record verbatim comments, then code actor similarity based on the degree of correspondence in their semantic content as the strength of a network tie. It is not based on direct communication between actors but on shared semantic domains.

A 'second-order' degree link is a weaker form of social network tie, but a stronger form of tie in a cultural studies framework. It is a more fluid discursive formation, with arguments ranging more widely across cultural constructions, and occurs when a social actor links to a website naming a social actor or adds to a threaded discussion on a discussion forum, but does not name the social actor. In second-order degree, as additional replies to an earlier post are entered, the first-order degree links of the multiple overlapping message pairs are not of direct interest. Rather, the interest is in the threads of posts and responses that emerge, in which the subsequent posters may be responding selectively to some of the early posters in the thread, or to someone mentioned in a post. The reply itself may not be to the original head post in the thread, but to the last post in the thread or something in between. The previous posters' identities may not be referenced in the subsequent post, only a concept that is carried across or evolves through the thread. Therefore, threads in internet discussion groups are considered to be second-order degree networks, because an individual (here, a public intellectual) is named at one point in the thread and the thread continues on with subsequent posts that may not mention explicitly the named individual, but discuss an evolving concept. The number of posts in the thread is the measure of second-order network degree.

In particular, the link agent for the purposes of this study is the public intellectual who typically is not actively involved in the discussion and may even be dead. As long as the public intellectual is named in a thread, that thread constitutes a second-order degree network variable for the public

intellectual. As in actor–network theory (Latour, 1987), the key elements are not only the social actors, such as the public intellectual and the participants in the discussion, but also symbolic and material constructions, such as the discussion concepts themselves as actants in the network.

Second-order degree networks involving public intellectuals are important manifestations of civil society in cyberspace in which they serve as objects or agents of discourse that link social actors together in voluntary networks. In short, for the purpose of this study, second-order degree network links are discursive formations that involve the naming of a public intellectual at some point in a message thread.

'Third-order' degree is a result of the link between a medium, itself an implicit social network, and a social actor. When a medium names an actor in isolation from other actors it creates a third-order link to the medium's network content domain. However, these mentions are treated not as ties between social actors or to explicit media content, but simply as atomistic mentions or 'hits'. A third-order degree link is the weakest form of network link in mediated content: the actor's name simply appears in the contextual network of media content, but is not analyzed as such.

The focus in this study is on second-order network degree for Google Groups, which here is the length of discussion threads in which public intellectuals are named, as well as on third-order network degree for each of the media studied.

HYPOTHESES

The hypotheses of this study are as follows:

> H1: Media that are more time transcendent (internet media) allow for a longer discourse 'afterlife' of public intellectuals than traditional mass media.

> H2: Dead public intellectuals have as much of a social presence in internet-based media as living public intellectuals. In other words, their thread lengths are equivalent. They are sociomorphically no different.

The method for testing these hypotheses was pioneered by Richard Posner (2001), whose book on public intellectuals sparked a certain controversy because of its supposedly brash insistence that public intellectual issues could be studied with quantitative data. Posner developed a list of all the people that he (and his colleagues) could think of that qualified as American public intellectuals. Unfortunately, he did not use the social network technique pioneered by Kadushin (1974), which asked policymakers to name the people they considered to be important public intellectuals. Posner coded the number of web hits, mass media appearances and scholarly citations of each name on his list received, using Google, Lexis/Nexis and Dialog.

Posner's conclusions are based mainly on coverage in the traditional mass media. He found, but did not discuss, the fact that his web discourse hits were uncorrelated with traditional mass media hits. This suggests a medium by public intellectual interaction effect. A limitation of Posner's web searching is that he only did regular Google searches rather than searching Google Groups, which contain thousands of discussion lists including the original Usenet lists.

METHOD

Research design

This study has taken Posner's list of public intellectuals, added 55 names to it ($N = 662$), and used a more detailed approach to quantify Google, Google Groups and Lexis/Nexis results from five years of mass media content. Also, it has taken into account whether each public intellectual is alive or dead, and for the latter, recording the year of death. Through this, an aspect of the public intellectual's web presence has been calculated in terms of an estimate of the total number of websites that involve their name, and the number and length of threads of related online discussions that mention them and discuss associated ideas in Google Groups. This is a limited view of the public life of public intellectuals in discussion forums. It is not presence in the sense of 'social presence' (Short et al., 1976), it is more simply a concept of being there, not the manner in which this being is projected to others. It provides evidence of the volume and persistence of public discussion associated with the public intellectual, but it does not capture the nature or content of the discussion. Unlike webpages, where presence has no necessary relationship to attention by web users, in discussion forums the presence of public intellectual names, their ideas and related ideas as seen in discussion threads is a measure of the degree of attention to the public intellectual and/or associated ideas.

Network measures

Third-order network degree was indexed as follows. The first 100 Google Group hits were examined individually to estimate the percentage of valid hits, i.e. those actually about the person in focus. This percentage was multiplied by the total number of hits returned. For broadcast, newspaper and magazine media, respectively, if Nexis returned more than 1000 hits, it would limit its display to only that number. In these cases, a search was conducted for the first six months and last six months of the time period and an estimate of the total number of hits above 1000 was formed. If such a search still had the 1000 hit limit problem, it was dropped to the first and last month windows and adjusted accordingly, multiplying by the number of time

periods to approximate the total number of hits. This method of estimation was chosen over doing all smaller time intervals due to limited resources.

Second-order network degree was indexed by the 'threadedness' of Group Groups hits. Threadedness is the number of posted replies to a previous post in a chain in which the public intellectual was mentioned. Hence, it is a measure of the group's local network connectivity surrounding the 'needle': here, the mention of the public intellectual.

RESULTS

Inter-coder reliability

An appropriate statistical test for reliability with interval/ratio level data is Pearson Correlation or Lin's Concordance (Neuendorf, 2002). For each of the variables assessed, the two scores were virtually identical, and so only a single number is presented for each variable. Coders 1 and 2 coded 137 public intellectuals' data in common and had a reliability coefficient of .95. They then trained the seven additional coders, each of whom had an overlap of eight. This yielded 213 double-coded cases. The overlap is proportionate to the amount of the sample on which each of the coders worked. These were selected from an alphabetical listing of all public intellectuals. PRAM (Program for Reliability Assessment with Multiple Coders) software was used for the analysis (see http://www.geocities.com/skymegsoftware/pram.html). Table 1 contains the reliability coefficients for the variables. All are in the high range. The average reliability coefficient is .93.

Normalization of variables

The raw media hit variables for the 662 people were log-transformed to normalize their distributions to a greater extent, as is the practice in social research for counts variables. Typically these have distributions that are highly right-skewed, with a string of high extreme scores and most scores near the bottom of the distribution. Therefore, as a result of the natural log

● Table 1   Reliability scores

MEDIA SOURCE	RELIABILITY SCORE
Google	.88
Google Group	.90
Threadedness	.93
Broadcast	.90
Newspaper	.99
Magazine	.99
Average	.93

transformations, the statistical tests are less subject to bias from non–normal distributions.

Based on the hypotheses, it is expected that dead public intellectuals will have an afterlife on the internet that is not observed for other media. Even though Posner made attempts to generate a census of the population of public intellectuals, one can find merit in the argument that this list is still partial, and therefore a judgmental sample. Hence, statistical significance values are reported as a guide for judging the pragmatic significance of the findings. *T*-tests were performed between dead and living public intellectuals on the various media's sociomorphic indicators.

Comparisons of dead and alive public intellectuals show significant differences in log–normalized values for the mass media, as seen in Table 2. Living public intellectuals have higher presence in these media. For newspapers, broadcasting and magazines the dead group had significantly fewer hits than the living group. Only for the internet measures – Google hits, Google Groups hits and threadedness – do the values for the living not exceed those for the dead. For Google hits the dead had hits no different from the living Moreover, the dead are privileged for Google Groups compared to the living. For threadedness, the dead had hits no different from the living. The results show that cyberspace is a special place for dead public intellectuals: there they receive attention no less than that of the living, and hence appear to have an internet afterlife that is as rich as the 'cyberlife' of the living.

It would be of interest to map the network structure among public intellectuals, based on their co–appearance in the same discussion threads. However, when the study was pilot tested, sufficient co–occurrence of public intellectuals in the same discussion threads was not found to warrant such an analysis. If present empirical evidence were to be presented for this observation, to do so would require redoing data capture which took the efforts of a number of research assistants operating over a period of a year. Although such data extraction is not feasible at this time, it is informative to examine some attributes of the public intellectuals in categorical terms.

• Table 2 Media hits for dead and alive public intellectuals

	LIVING		DEAD			
	MEAN	SD	MEAN	SD	*t*	*p*
Newspapers	4.63	2.89	3.99	2.78	2.64	.008
Broadcasting	−1.36	4.07	−2.95	3.62	4.75	.000
Magazines	1.39	3.10	.58	3.26	3.02	.003
Google hits	8.33	1.41	8.36	1.83	−.24	.807
Google Group hits	6.29	2.39	6.77	2.29	−2.39	.017
Threadedness	43.14	106.42	37.11	26.0	.61	.543
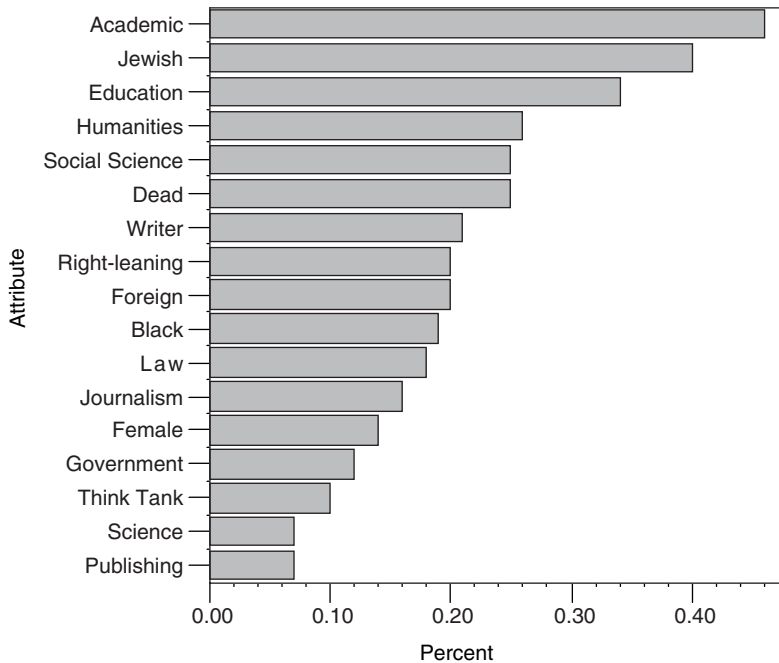
● Figure 1   Attributes of public intellectuals

Figure 1 shows the categories of public intellectuals in terms of their professions, as reported by Posner (2001), and their frequencies.

DISCUSSION

This study found support for both H1 and H2. The findings show that broadcast is the most present-minded of the media, generating the least amount of space for those now dead. The other mass media – newspapers and magazines – also discount the dead. However, on the internet, dead public intellectuals have a social afterlife, a sociomorphic quality that continues in cyberspace. This is a cultural domain in which discursive formations involving public intellectuals continue to evolve.

The findings relate to the existing body of research concerning evaluations of online discussion. Clearly, researchers should be cautious before asserting that online discussions represent some kind of instant reinvigoration of civil society and democracy. The present study shares this caution, but its evidence does support a more positive evaluation of online discussions. Nevertheless, the substance of these discussions is not known, and it is also unknown whether a closer examination beyond the scope of this study would reveal any evidence of increased strength of civil society or democracy. Mentions of public intellectuals and associated ideas, as measured in Google Groups searches, give us only a thin slice across the body of online discussions;

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clearly, this measure is limited. Still, the finding that public intellectuals both dead and alive have such a strong online presence – in websites and online discussions – relative to their presence in the mass media, leads one to observe that substantive, civil society-building, online discussions may not merely be the stuff of dreamy speculation. Nevertheless, pertinent evidence as to whether or not this is the case awaits future research. Are internet discussions fostering a new form of public intellectualism? As discussed previously, the idea of the public intellectual is associated often with decline. Many who address the situation of the public intellectual point to what they consider to be a decline in the number of public intellectuals. The present results point to a more complicated story, finding that the internet supports discussion of dead intellectuals better than the broadcast and print media examined. The discourse 'afterlife' effect – the idea that the internet supports discussions about the dead better than broadcast or print – indicates that the supposed disappearance of public intellectuals may be slowed down or even reversed through internet-based modes of communication. In and of itself, this does not refute directly the notion of a public intellectual decline. However, it does indicate that some forms of communication relating to intellectuals – those that occur online compared to in other media – are actually intensifying rather than dissipating. In this sense, when viewed in terms of communicative impact, intellectuals seem to be far from their last gasp.

The temporal dimension of this study highlights how internet media may operate differently than some expect. Although to some observers it may seem intuitively appealing to expect that new media will act as the 'midwife' for a new generation of public intellectuals, the picture is somewhat more complicated. What we observe is preservation – and sometimes even an enhancement – of mentions of long-dead public intellectuals, compared to mass media. This discrepancy can be traced to the internet's tendency to act as a storage medium. The broader importance of this may be that we may not have any need for replacing what Russell Jacoby called the 'last intellectuals'; they are still actively functioning as intellectuals online. Of course, this need not be taken to be reassuring. A focus on the public intellectuals of the past may represent an escape to the past, a failure of imagination. A broad application of what is suggested in this study may be that present-oriented mass media probably function more efficiently as organs for introducing public intellectuals, while internet-based media allow for the elongation of a public intellectual's influence.

Finally, it is worth pointing out what the present findings mean in terms of the study of reputation. Often, studies of reputation have outlined helpfully how individuals' reputations result not solely from the identity or deeds of the individual, but also from a variety of social processes surrounding

the individual. Frequently, those who study reputations examine how the reputations of the dead are shaped by interested parties or 'reputational entrepreneurs' (e.g. Lang and Lang, 1990; Rodden, 1989; Rothenbuhler, 2005). This study agrees that these players in the world of reputation are important. However, the machinations of the reputational process are not carried out in a media vacuum. The introduction of the internet may have opened up a new front for those who hope to lend aid to or contend the reputation of a public intellectual or other public figure. If reputational processes mirror the qualities of the relatively new internet (with its storage capabilities), we may be witnessing the commencement of a time when the dead can be enlisted more easily to serve the causes of the present.

CONCLUSION

Limitations of the study

Google searches were not time-limited and this could be seen as problematic, because Google can yield results from well before 1998. Still, the steepest-sloped growth of the web in the last five years means that the present results remained were heavily weighted toward more recently posted material.

This study sought to study the population of public intellectuals by using Posner's enumeration and expanding on it, incorporating names that critics claimed Posner should have included. Whether this constitutes an acceptable census of public intellectuals could be subject to debate. Some observers might not consider some of the personalities listed to be 'true' public intellectuals, while others would argue that some public intellectuals have been missed. While acknowledging this, it is believed that the set of 662 public intellectuals studied is a reasonable approximation of the population of such individuals.

Suggestions for future research

This study envisions researchers paying more attention to a chronically underexamined part of the public intellectual scene: the content of discourse. The current research has merely assessed the message volume and threadedness associated with public intellectuals and related ideas. It would be fruitful to study the word association networks across discourse streams (Corman et al., 2002; Danowski, 1993b) or to use more traditional methods of content analysis. While threadedness is a message content-based construct, it is only an indirect measure of content. It is more clearly a measure of the persistence of discussion associated with a public intellectual and related ideas, not the composition of the threads. Their semantic composition would be a valuable component of a broader attention to public intellectuals and the internet.

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Acknowledgements

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