

Intellectuals and Social Networks: New Media, Old Traditions

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Abstract

Within the framework of the dominant narratives of the decline of intellectuals in western society and of the responsibility of the media for the loss of authority of erudite culture, this paper argues that one of the central institutions where the identity of intellectuals was cemented, the eighteenth century salon, is being re-enacted today on the internet. By supplying technological resources for the socialization of the projects of each intellectual in a network of peers, lay experts and non-specialists, the Internet, a liquid media *par excellence*, as a privileged set for new authorities of knowledge to express and expand themselves, has become not just a cause of disintegration, but also a powerful social re-construction tool both for the intellectual community and public culture. The Internet is a place where intellectuals are finding room to exert their role as the reflexive conscience of the contemporary era.

Keywords: intellectuals, television, Internet, eighteenth century salons, social networks

The increasing invisibility of intellectuals in the contemporary public sphere has been seen as a sign of both the decline of the Enlightenment project and of the reflexive conscience in contemporary society. Throughout this process, the media have been considered among those institutions that have contributed the most towards the reconfiguration of the public culture (Habermas, 1991; Dahlgren, 1995; Norris, 2000). This reconfiguration has been shaped by the erosion of the frontiers between the public and private spheres, in a dynamic movement that can be characterized by the privatization of the public sphere and the publication of the private sphere. The colonization of the public by the private, i.e., the incorporation of its communication logic, among other factors, has led to the erosion of the modern notion of public culture built on rationality, reflexivity and critical spirit, and to the emergence of a culture of intimacy, informality and emotions.

Following Bauman (2000),² this colonization may be understood as the process by which the public sphere is becoming liquid. Within this context, the paper aims to discuss the relationship between intellectuals and the media in the modern era,

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²According to Bauman (2000), modernity has substituted the structure of traditional society for its own model, while the contemporary era of modernity has been characterized by dismantling the modern project without replacing it with another one. The solidity, durability, and certainty of the past are giving way in the twenty-first century's second modernity to a liquid society, built on doubts, overlaps, and transitions. Within this context, a revised relationship with authority has emerged, i.e., a more negotiated relationship between citizens and power elites. Authority frames built on hierarchy, distance and obedience have been eroded (Arendt, 1954), and a critical, self-expressive, and anti-

inscribing the debate in the reconfiguration of the public sphere as a consequence of changes within the media. In the social and cultural liquification of western societies, modern institutions are facing a deterioration process (Bauman, 2000: 6) and the authorities of knowledge, such as intellectuals (and their type of thought and speech), may no longer be adequate to liquid modernity. Hence, the paper aims to reflect upon the post-visibility era of intellectuals. In the apparently hostile cultural context of contemporary society, the prefix “post” is used as what comes after an era that recognized the intellectuals as central figures of modernity and in times when the media were their allies.

Within the framework of the dominant narratives of the decline of intellectuals in western society (Jacoby, 2000; Posner, 2004; Furedi, 2005) and of the responsibility of the media for the loss of authority of the erudite culture (Keen, 2007; Lipovetsky, 2009), I would argue that the Internet, a liquid media par excellence, (1) has revealed itself as a fundamental place for intellectuals to regain protagonism – in spite of being a privileged place for the expression and expansion of new authorities – and (2) has allowed those same intellectuals to return to their origins. By analyzing the presence of intellectuals on the Internet it is possible to state that this medium is allowing the creation of something that, from a cultural perspective, resembles what the salons of the eighteenth century did for the emergence and institutionalization of the intellectual. Through the web, many intellectuals are finding room and conditions for exerting their authority and reinforcing the twenty-first century intellectual community.

Illustrating each topic with European and Anglo-American examples, as representative of western trends, the paper starts by analyzing the concept of intellectual and the tensions between old and new perceptions of the authority of knowledge; then, it discusses the demotic turn of the media, i.e., “the growing visibility given to ordinary people” (Turner, 2009: 2) and the evolution of the (in)visibility of intellectuals in the mainstream media. The paper endeavours to show how one of the central institutions in which the identity of the intellectuals was cemented – the salons of the eighteenth century – is now being recreated on the Internet. The digital media are constituting

hierarchical citizen is emerging in their stead (Beck, 2000).

therefore a powerful cultural tool for social (re)construction of the intellectual community and for symbolic (re)empowerment of the intellectuals.

Intellectuals: from legislators to interpreters of culture

The emergence of the intellectual is deeply intertwined with the Enlightenment salons (Habermas, 1991; Goodman, 1994; Melton, 2001). These places had a central role in the Republic of Letters, the home of men of letters, and worked as a locus for intellectual communities to debate and build a collective identity (Melton, 2001: 206).

The epithet ‘intellectual’ was only created at the end of the nineteenth century and it meant to offend men of letters that headed a campaign against the French state because of the “Dreyfus Affair” (1898). By publishing his famous article *J’Accuse*, Émile Zola is one of the first examples of the relationship between the figure of the intellectual – characterized by independence, knowledge and critical spirit – and public intervention through the media (Jacoby, 2000; Posner, 2004).

Throughout time, the above-mentioned attributes have given prestige, credibility, and respectability to intellectuals, leading authors such as Gramsci (in the 30s), Foucault (1980) or Baumann (1987) to discuss the intellectuals’ role in disseminating ideas and forming knowledge. However, the growth of relativism and specialization, as well as of the professionalization of academic life (Baumann, 1987; Bourdieu, 1991; Posner, 2004; Furedi, 2005) have had far-reaching consequences for the intellectual community.

From the 1950s onwards, in the aftermath of the expansion of academia, the professionalization of intellectual life led intellectuals to concentrate on their careers, and to keep busy with multiple bureaucratic tasks. On the other hand, the increase in specialization, detectable in fragmented and narrower approaches, started to discourage a wider perspective on subjects and to privilege the particular and the concrete. Furthermore, the erosion of the Enlightenment legacy in the late 20th century, the transformation of knowledge into ‘knowledges’ and the change in the public perception of intellectuals, who were now regarded not as heralds of universal truths but rather as proponents of a particular viewpoint, also called the status of intellectuals into question, and their erudition started to be seen as one point of view without exceptional relevance

to society (Furedi, 2005: 43-5).

In this process, the intellectual's traditional attributes of independence, autonomy, public intervention and universality of thought were compromised. This led, according to Bauman (1987), to the loss of their role as cultural "legislators", which was changed into the far more modest role as "interpreters" of culture, as communication "facilitators". Inscribed in their new role, some of these intellectuals were converted into media celebrities.

Invested in their role as legislators, intellectuals used to make authoritative statements. Occasionally, they were denigrated, because they were considered either subversives or naysayers, but they were generally respected. Some of these intellectuals tended to have a difficult relationship with the *status quo*, even if some of them represented the dominant power(s), whom Gramsci (1983) called "organic intellectuals".

Moreover, the growing relevance of the media in contemporary society led several authors, such as Eric Louw (2001: 13) and Alan McKee (2002: 221), to consider that the above mentioned changes do not just lead to a variation in scale, but to a structural redefinition of the concept of the "intellectual". According to these authors, new kinds of "intellectuals" are arising out of communication and popular culture, people such as television producers, screenplay writers or publicists. These authors view them as intellectuals by highlighting the growing power of these media professions in the definition, production and dissemination of public knowledge. This perspective, besides reflecting a desacralized perspective on knowledge, also emphasizes the social relevance and influence of the media in contemporary era, by overpowering the symbolic power that intellectuals used to have in the past and that the media helped consolidating.

These changes are a symptom of the broader context of the crisis of the authority of voices (Couldry, 2010) in the contemporary era. The crisis of voices is an element of a bigger crisis, the one of the modern project and the difficulties faced by contemporary society in implementing an alternative model (Bauman, 2000). Within this process, cultural institutions edified in modernity are losing the relevance that they used to have

in the past. These institutions' inability to deal with social change is, according to Ulrich Beck, transforming them into "zombie categories". This is how Beck defines some dimensions of modernity that are "dead, and yet still alive" (in Bauman, 2000: 6), i.e., institutions that keep existing, though inadequate to the contemporary era.

Titles of relevant work on intellectuals published in recent years in western society illustrate well Beck's expression: *The Last Intellectuals*, from Russell Jacob; *Public Intellectuals: A History of Decline*, from Richard Posner, and *Where Have all the Intellectuals Gone?*, from Frank Furedi. Bridging decline, disappearance and extinction, the titles of the books represent the non-optimistic tone of the debate around the place of the intellectuals in the modern era, in which the media are a central institution. Between the 'old' and 'new' authorities of knowledge, the media are playing a relevant role.

The media's demotic turn: from the cult of the intellectual to the cult of the ordinary citizen

In the last few decades, the media, namely the European ones, have suffered a significant cultural transformation, from a rational sphere of civic enlightenment (Jaspers, 1998) to a place for entertaining, which is increasingly occupied by ordinary citizens (Turner, 2009).

The formal and hierarchized relationship, built on a principle of distance between specialists and the public, has given room to an informal and emotional relationship built on proximity between the media and the audience. With reality TV the ordinary citizen-viewer has also become television content and his/her ways of expression and interests have started to be increasingly valued and legitimized by TV. The success of programs such as *Big Brother* and *American Idol*,³ and its worldwide format adaptation, illustrate well this trend. In turn, with the development of the Internet the doors of the core power of the media, the access to broadcasting, were open to ordinary people. Thus, any citizen started to have the possibility to become a producer in their own terms, giving place to what Manuel Castells (2009: 24) defined as "mass self-communication". A considerable amount of digital communication content is

³ Entertainment programs such as *Big Brother* and *Idols* are some of the most popular international TV formats of the twenty-first century television. The first one mentioned started in the Netherlands in 2000, and the latter in England

produced and broadcasted by “producers”, which are rapidly and easily disseminated through audiences that they have self-selected, and through these audience contacts, in a logic from many to many. The Internet is therefore promoting a horizontal communication network built around ordinary citizens’ initiative, interests and perspectives.

Throughout time, the changes within the European media landscape illustrate well how the signaled transformations have been reflected on both the presence of intellectuals and of ordinary citizens in the media. Between 1950 and 1970-1980, TV was perceived as a vehicle for reinforcing national identity and a tool for cultural democratization (Chaplin, 2007). This ideal gave place to a variety of programs, which included shows with national and world-renowned philosophers.

Let us start first with an example from Portuguese TV. “Se bem me lembro” (*If I remember well*) (broadcast between 1969 and 1975), presented by Vitorino Nemésio, and “Imagens da Poesia Europeia” (*Images from the European Poetry*) (broadcast between 1969 and 1974), presented by David Mourão-Ferreira, were two weekly shows broadcast by the main public Portuguese TV channel, *RTP1*.⁴ The author-presenters were both Portuguese intellectuals with a vast and similar curriculum. Both were poets, writers, university Professors and members of the Academy of Sciences of Lisbon. In both shows erudite culture was the main topic and in each program themes were addressed through the presenters giving a talk.

These shows had a significant success in Portuguese society, confirming the admiration and the impact that these intellectuals had, gathering around the TV screen educated viewers familiar with the topics tackled, but also viewers that looked at the programs as an opportunity for learning.

The second set of examples comes from France. The first show under consideration is called *télé-tube* and it was broadcasted for the first time in 1952 by the

with *Pop Idol* in 2001, but rapidly was exported to Australia, Malaysia, United States of America, Brazil, Belgium, Canada, Norway, Denmark, Germany, Middle East countries, Portugal, Spain, among many other countries.

⁴*RTP1 (Rádio Televisão Portuguesa)* was the first TV station airing in Portugal. This public channel started broadcasting for the first time in 1957 and it was the only TV channel available in the country until 1968, when the second public channel, *RTP2*, appeared. The public TV broadcasting system had the monopoly of the Portuguese audiovisual panorama for 35 years. It was only in 1989 that the Portuguese constitution was altered in order to allow private companies to own TV channels in the country. The first Portuguese private TV channel,

main French public television channel *TF1*. The program was created with the intention of working as a distance teaching vehicle, embodying the spirit of TV back then, understood as an extension of the State educational system, fulfilling therefore an education role in society. The program enacted a classroom in which contents lectured in the French schooling system were addressed. It was created for children, but it also aimed at reaching less educated adults from rural areas. The programs' success led to the export of its concept to other countries, such as England, Italy, Japan (Chaplin, 2007: 19) and Portugal.

Between 1953 and 1958, *TF1* broadcasted *Lectures pour tous/Lectures for all* with, among other philosophers, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. The program promoted far beyond the university walls some of the most relevant French intellectuals, transforming them into truly nationwide authorities and stars. Gaston Bachelard, for instance, became a really well known personality and became dear to the French population by personifying with his long white beard and old age, the popular imaginary of the Greek philosopher.

This set of shows broadcast by French TV, and by Portuguese TV as well, illustrate how television had an explicit educational role and how it was a cultural space, assuming a pedagogical contract with its viewers. However, from the 1970s onwards, cultural programming began to have mainly entertainment purposes. *Apostrophes* (1975-1990), created and presented by Bernard Pivot, started this trend by structuring debate around conflict. Intellectuals were carefully chosen for their incompatible viewpoints, with the goal of building tension and drama, and ultimately entertainment. The same presenter, in another show entitled *Bouillon de culture/Bubble of culture*, broadcast between 1991 and 2011, took this concept even further. Personalities from showbiz and public figures started to appear on the program, in which culture was approached as commercial entertainment and produced almost as a variety show.

As already mentioned, the rational public sphere was a debating space for public issues, structured on formal and hierarchized relationships and built on the distance between specialists and audience (Mehl, 2002). However, gradually, television started,

SIC, started broadcasting in 1992, and in the year after, the second private one, *TVI*, appeared.

for commercial reasons, to focus on the ordinary citizen, valuing him/her and legitimizing his/her way of expression and his interests, creating an open cultural arena, accessible and intelligible to all: old and young, men and women, educated or not. Therefore, the increasing path towards the commercialization of television, anchored in shows to entertain and amuse, revolved around the ordinary citizen, valuing him/her and legitimizing his/her way of expression and interests, as illustrated by reality-TV. Within this process, intellectuals and experts started to lose the leading role in the public sphere to the ordinary citizen and his/her type of knowledge.

The Portuguese case illustrates well the media's demotic turn. This trend started in the beginning of the 1990s with the emergence of private broadcasting channels. Initially, the "access to consumption" of expert opinion (Figueiras, 2008) was democratized, by having pundits on the most watched newscasts; then, gradually, opinion was extended to what could be called "democratization of opinion production" (Figueiras, 2008). At the same time shows anchored in the opinion of ordinary citizens made their debut on radio too. These shows opened the airwaves for ordinary people to speak freely, i.e., without having to comply with the rules of public debate, which was expected to be enlightened, grounded and rational (Habermas, 1991).

The press also explored one of the most fundamental Western democratic rights, that of free expression. Throughout the 1990s, newspapers underwent a demotic turn with the aim to readjust themselves for a new market, a market completely profit-oriented, less in tune with hard news and guided by the tastes of the average person. To achieve these aims one of the strategies employed was to create more room for ordinary citizens in the newspaper pages (Figueiras, 2010). *Diário de Notícias* – a Portuguese quality newspaper –, for instance, put the ordinary citizen at the centre of its Opinion pages by creating new sections relying on *vox populi*. For example, the section "Hunches" published anonymous opinions on public issues gathered on the street (Figueiras, 2010). It was unimportant what the people, who were randomly selected, knew about the topics chosen or how they were able to express their views.

This strategy has stimulated a different kind of participation from that commonly expressed in Letters to the Editor. The latter, even though they represented

the voice of the readers, complied with certain criteria in order to be published. In contrast, text relevance, quality of writing, and solidity of arguments lost relevance in the new sections centered on *vox populi*, as we have seen in “Hunches”.

Communication technologies have been taking even further the presence of ordinary citizens in the news media. “Demotic journalism”⁵ – a form of journalism involving ordinary people in journalistic routines and valuing the citizens’ everyday life experience as a kind of expertise – has been flourishing through network technology. Blogs, vlogs, streaming, and other forms of interactive communication, have been allowing people to participate actively in the news making process for some time now (Gilmor, 2006; Deuze, 2008; Allan and Thorsen, 2009). These and other feedback systems are being used to feed both around-the-clock media outlets and citizen-generated media. Ordinary people are capturing real events as these are happening and make them almost instantaneously public. By doing so, citizens are responding to the news agenda of media outlets, but are also pushing journalists to accommodate user generated content, as in the case of *CNN* “iReport”.

For some theorists, the unparalleled degree of human agency and user control expressed in demotic journalism is undermining the position of journalism in contemporary society because it challenges its symbolic leading role as watchdog and information provider (Norris, 2000: 22). While doing so, demotic journalism is also reconfiguring and bypassing traditional hierarchies and relations of communicative power (Deuze, 2008: 860), traditionally attached to power elites, journalism’s institutionalized primary definers.

The media demotic turn therefore introduced other levels of approach, other themes and protagonists in the public sphere, a cultural matrix that had previously been related to enlightened perspectives and public opinion formation by intellectuals and specialists (Habermas, 1991). Because of the confluence of all these factors, the *vox populi* started speaking in its own right, refusing the notion of intellectuals acting as its spokespersons, thus, thinkers have begun to lose relevance in the public sphere.

⁵ What I am referring to as demotic journalism is, despite variations, what some authors are calling “grassroots journalism” (Gilmor, 2006: xv), “citizen journalism” (Allan, 2009: 17), or “liquid journalism” (Deuze, 2008: 848).

“Symbolic capital” (status, reputation, the right to be listened to) and “cultural capital” (education, competencies, skills) (Bourdieu, 1991), were no longer a prerequisite to access realms that used to be exclusive for intellectuals and journalists.

The morphing of the cultural sphere is also bringing about changes in education in the Anglo-American countries, Germany, Holland, Italy, France (Furedi, 2009), and Portugal, among others. Education oriented to intellectual growth has been substituted by an education towards building careers (Chaplin, 2007). More recently it has also brought about a policy in which the tension between the “old” and “new” authorities of knowledge is expressed.

Classical authors are being erased from the curricula on the assumption that they do not meet students’ interests, and substituted by materials related to students’ everyday life and also by a certain type of knowledge colonized by the media culture. An episode that occurred in Portugal in 2004 illustrates this change well. In that year, the rulings of the reality show *Big Brother* were included in a schoolbook of one of the most prestigious Portuguese publishing houses. In the book students were asked to comment on the show in class and to write a technical opinion regarding the rules of the program. This exercise opened a polemic amidst teachers and experts, forcing the publishing house to remove the specific exercise from the schoolbook.⁶ At the same time, teachers’ authority is constantly being devaluated and demoted. On the one hand, teachers are asked to teach in a playful manner and on the other, governments are encouraging the former to put themselves in the place of learners, as the knowledge pupils bring to school and offer teachers, is being increasingly valued (Furedi, 2009: 9).

For Furedi (2005), this cultural policy has contributed to the “intellectual malaise” (idem, 2005: 102) of the contemporary era which, together with the increasing commercialization of the public space and the marketization of the cultural sphere, has led to both the loss of relevance and visibility of erudite knowledge and of intellectuals in the public sphere.

Intellectuals and the web-salons

⁶In *Público*, “PCP pede explicações ao ministro da Educação sobre manuais escolares do 10º ano”, 12/03/2003. http://www.publico.pt/Educacao/pcp-pede-explicacoes-ao-ministro-da-educacao-sobre-manuais-escolares-do-10-ano_1177583?all=1 (accessed at October 2nd2010).

Authors such as Andrew Keen (2007) and Gilles Lipovetsky (2009) hold the Internet responsible for the loss of relevance of experts and erudite culture. In this era of users generating content production – one of the main seductive and promoted characteristics of social networks –, blogs or *wikipedia* entries are developed by individuals without credentials and prior intellectual work to validate what they produce. This raises a set of questions on the cultural consequences of these new practices, namely concerning the authority of knowledge. If anyone, regardless of his/her knowledge, can participate in these social networks, what place is reserved for specialist and intellectual knowledge? And, consequently, in what sense is the Internet re-enacting the Enlightenment salons?

With the aim of finding answers to the raised questions that led the paper, let me start by quoting examples: Naomi Klein⁷ and Noam Chomsky's⁸ official sites; Amin Maalouf⁹ and Paul Krugman's¹⁰ blogs; the *Huffington post*¹¹ and *The New Yorker*¹² blogs where several thinkers write; and the online channel *fora-tv*,¹³ where reflexive knowledge is valued and time is given to intellectuals to address issues of contemporary society.

These examples are relevant elements to consider in a paper about the place of intellectuals in the modern era, but let us first tackle the issue from the perspective of the audience. Addressing non-specialist audiences is a traditional component of the intellectual's role (Bauman, 1987; Jacoby, 2000; Posner, 2004; Furedi, 2005; Park, 2006). Hence one may ask: what kind of relationship is the Internet offering to intellectuals and their audience? And compared to television, is the Internet restricting or enlarging the intellectuals' audience?

Let us go back to the years in which there were only the old media and in which television was the dominant media. From the 1950s to the 1970s, there were only one to three national television channels in most European countries (McQuail, 2005).

⁷<http://www.naomiklein.org/main>

⁸<http://www.chomsky.info/>

⁹<http://www.aminmaalouf.net/en/>

¹⁰<http://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/>

¹¹<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/the-blog/>

¹²<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/>

¹³<http://fora.tv/>

Communication was vertical, from one to many, and controlled exclusively by the sender. Hence, the communicative structure between intellectuals and audience was monological and hierarchical. Gathered in front of the TV screen, at the same time, almost everybody received the same message (McQuail, 2005: 415), whereas the limited number of choices made it possible for a television program, like those offered by intellectuals, to easily reach “unexpected audiences” (Wolton, 1999: 322), i.e., viewers who watched certain programs by chance. Viewers who wanted to watch television in a given time had to watch whatever was being aired at the moment due to the low amount of television channels available at the time. Consequently, audiences for intellectuals were vast, heterogeneous, and widely composed of non-specialists, i.e., composed of a huge number of viewers who watched them because they enjoyed watching television, and therefore watched whatever program was on air.

With that said, in the rich and complex media environment of present times, there is no concrete content, nor a central channel; rather there are many diverse sets of media producers and users and therefore audiences are becoming increasingly fragmented (McQuail, 2005: 415). Going back to the examples offered, all of the sites and blogs mentioned encourage us to leave a comment or participate in their discussion forums by means of using peer-sourcing and social-networking principles. For instance, *The New Yorker* includes live chats, where at a scheduled time, writers and readers debate. This interaction made available by technology reveals much more than a technological possibility. It translates a new cultural environment structured on a more horizontal, interactive and dynamic communication.

This dialogical and reciprocal communication culture is in great contrast to that where intellectuals had a regular presence on television. It seems that the Internet is allowing the reinforcement of the intellectual community who are motivated and interested in discussing issues in an enlightened fashion. But, having said that, does the media pulverization of the digital era allow intellectuals, as TV did in the past, to reach unexpected audiences?

The digital places occupied by the intellectuals mentioned have a vast set of communication tools which allow them to reach in a direct and indirect way not only

their followers, but also unexpected audiences – apparently a viewer profile more common in non complex and generalist media environments, such as the one described above. By means of the communication tools available, intellectuals may reach their followers by sharing a text with their *Facebook* contacts, by tweeting it, stumbling it, emailing it or recommending it. But by sharing their thoughts on *Facebook*, on *twitter*, on *Stumble*, and by *email*, or through any other social network, intellectuals, too, may reach a much wider auditorium than those who actively look for them in their digital residences. Hence, those texts or links may become public to third parties who are contacts of their contacts in the social networks.

Through these connected nodes, anyone can be reached and, indeed, many people are, as indicated by various access statistics. Therefore, the increased number of media outlets may be causing audience fragmentation (Webster, 2005), but, at the same time, the social network communication tools seem to be providing a mechanism for convergence and return. Nowadays, in the media scenario of abundance, multiple available autonomous centers and channels are being connected, thus creating what Holton (2010: 19) calls a “convergent fragmentation”.

In this context, common concerns and interests work as principles of inclusiveness, linking dispersed people with common interests, just like correspondence did for the intellectual community during the Enlightenment period. During the Enlightenment, “correspondence made collaboration across Europe, and even across the Atlantic, possible and bound citizens of the republic into a cooperative network of intellectual exchange. Through correspondence, men of letters overcame distances that would otherwise have kept them from fruitful discussion and access to scholarly resources” (Goodman, 1994: 99). Then, much like now, all connections together formed clusters, which combined to form small worlds. Much like eighteenth century salons, concrete loci for the Republic of Letters – a territory not defined territorially (Goodman, 1994: 105) –, the web sites quoted above constitute a place where the intellectual community can express itself, spread its message and expand its influence through multiple types of audiences. Therefore, the new media, even though a privileged place

for expression and expansion of new authorities, have revealed themselves also to be a fundamental place for intellectuals to regain protagonism. Thus, the internet today is providing a place for intellectuals to express themselves, to be read and have their authority exerted; it also allows for the intellectual community to keep up with each other and construct meaning around a particular set of interests.

Hence, from analyzing the presence of intellectuals on the Internet it is possible to conclude that the medium is allowing the reappearance of something that, from a cultural perspective, resembles what the eighteenth century salons did for the emergence and institutionalization of the figure of the intellectual. Through the web, many intellectuals are finding a space and conditions for exerting their authority and reinforcing the twenty-first century intellectual community.

Final remarks

The paper discussed the relationship between intellectuals and the media, inscribing the debate in the reconfiguration of the public sphere due to cultural and economic changes in the media. If in the past intellectuals found in the media an ally for their edification, projection and reinforcement of their symbolic power in society, the media's commercial turn and the increasing protagonism of ordinary citizens in the complex media environment of the present time has led to the emergence of several theses blaming the media for the invisibility of intellectuals in the contemporary public sphere.

The social and cultural liquidity of the modern contemporary era has contributed to the revision of the concept of authority and of the relevance of erudite and enlightened knowledge. As stated in the paper, many western governments, through education, have been allowing the reinforcement of a certain type of knowledge colonized by the media culture and structured around the everyday experience. This type of knowledge also finds expression in the culture of "do it yourself" technologies of the Internet. Within this context, several authors consider that the culture propagated about (and by) the new media has been the main driving force behind the repealing of "old" knowledge and its main protagonists, the intellectuals.

However, this paper questions that idea and therefore aims at debating the post-

visibility of intellectuals in the apparently hostile cultural context of contemporary era. I aimed to know what happened after a time that used to recognize them as central figures of modernity and when the mainstream media were their allies. Intellectuals were searched for on the Internet, a place where all the media are converging. The research allowed me to verify that, through the web, many thinkers are finding spaces and conditions to exert their authority and to reinforce the twenty-first century intellectual community. It was also verified that one of the most relevant institutions in which the identity of the intellectuals was cemented – the eighteenth century salons – is being re-enacted on the Internet.

Overall, then, when the public sphere of the Enlightenment expanded to include ever-widening circles of cultural consumers and producers in the late eighteenth century, salons seem not to have survived the tensions between old and new perceptions of authorities of knowledge and became a thing of the past (Melton, 2001: 208-09). In the late twentieth century, when the commercialization of the public sphere and the media's demotic turn expanded, the fear of decline and disappearance of intellectuals returned; but as this paper has endeavored to show, web-salons may be playing a central role in breaking that cycle. By supplying technological resources for the socialization of the projects of each intellectual in a network of peers, lay experts and non-specialists, the Internet, a liquid media *par excellence*, as a privileged set for new authorities of knowledge to express and expand themselves, has become not just a cause of disintegration, but also a powerful social re-construction tool both for the intellectual community and for public culture. The Internet is a place where intellectuals are finding room to exert their role as the reflexive conscience of the modern era.

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