

Twenty years ago Russell Jacoby wrote “The Last Intellectuals”, of which a central point was that the solution of the making-a-living problem for intellectuals through becoming academics meant the end of their essential contact with the public in general, and the end of the role they could play in illuminating the public in special. In other words, to illuminate the public about anything or to be illuminated by the public about anything, to be a “public intellectual” as Jacoby put it, was not allowed under the conditions of academic propriety and peer review for tenure set by universities; and Jacoby convincingly argued on how this point explained why no Mumford-like intellectuals succeeded the Mumford-like* intellectuals of the previous generation. This point, unfortunately, does explain the numbness of the intellectuals twenty years later, i.e. now, a numbness explaining many of the very bad features of our days but it doesn’t explain why, fortunately, twenty years were not enough to make this numbness more effective and even worse, e.g. brainscape-mutilating and total. The answer is of course internet combined with optional paying, i.e. the solution to the problem, of direct contact between the public and the intellectuals, that was provided by sites in the internet sustained by optional contributions but not needing a fee to enter. And since, by indicative coincidence, Michael Albert and his friends started ZNet twenty years ago, we can consider the existence and role of all such sites as an explanation of how the chain and function of those intellectuals was never broken and Chomsky-like intellectuals**, plus Chomsky himself, continued to function. Let’s elaborate a little on that to apply its core and its moral to another similar context where it might be badly needed. If we got that point by Russell Jacoby right, in prewar years prices, payments, demand etc were such that one could live on book reviews and book writing (in the proverbial “genteel poverty” of the thinkers, of course) and in live contact with the public, both in the sense of mutual mind-feeding and in the sense of almost direct payment of a thinker by the public to live and think and give back substantial books, a process that helped thinkers keep functioning independently of conditions set by intermediaries of this relation, like bossing promoters, institutions etc, but later one could not function in this way and had to either enter the academia or (physically) die, and to enter the academia one had to publish or perish, and to publish one had to address peer specialists, not the public, and to meet their quotas for being effective and useful, not the public’s, i.e. to (metaphorically) die (in the sense of entering a closed group “writing articles for each other in order not to be considered as not expert-enough”, a self-feeding circularity which ultimately only helps in keeping some jobs in existence) and refrain from publicly expressing opinions as citizen rather than as specialist. Can the “ZNet way”, i.e. what we called above “the internet combined with optional paying, way” help return to the idyllic (=bookreview-freethought-bookwriting) days before the academia way? What can book writers do to be sustained (if e.g. they don’t happen to have had a training in a field that one can e.g. teach in a high school? (e.g. physics which, by the way, is the present author’s way to go by)) now that not only books but even book reviews need an editor? Open a site and ask every once in a while for donations to have free time to write more books? Even if this made sense, which it doesn’t, how would their site be known at all to begin with? OK, book reviews of people the public doesn’t know by people the public knows, would break out of this circle but wouldn’t earn anybody a living (and could also end in mutual paid blowjobs merely disorienting the public). How can one repeat, now too, whatever it was, in the past, that helped the public find, reach and sustain directly a live circle of thinkers reaching out to it? Maybe the only thing that has changed is the, now, pimp-like mediation of an editor (either of regular books or of electronic books), or the selfpimp-like intervention of pimpeditor-like criteria and goals and values of authors themselves. If the

*We say “Mumford-like intellectuals” instead of just “Mumfords” in the plural because we believe that Mumford himself would still be unique and singular even if no end of the chain of intellectuals through absorption into universities had taken place.
 **We say “Chomsky-like intellectuals” instead of just “Chomskies” in the plural because we believe that Chomsky himself is still unique and singular since, among other things, no weakening in his role as public intellectual took place through his being a regular university professor too.

above external mediation and internal intervention were absent, things might be much closer to the idyllic days or even better. Namely:

One can write short, leaflet size, abstracts or samples of one's books, include in a kit inside them a CD with the full version of his pages (with a number of photos or even music etc that no editors, now or in the past, could ever finance) and have them distributed in stands, and kiosks and consenting bookstores at charges of the order of pizza-delivery fee by offices of young bikers etc. The charge for the reader of the longest epic in this format would be not more, but maybe less, than comics and Mickey/Donald etc stories. To make payment really optional could be assured by writing on the back cover of these leaflets the site where one could download the whole thing (the CD) for free (in case the leaflet was distributed not in a bookstore but in a stand, in which the back cover might not be visible, the site's name could be written on the front cover or on the stand itself if the kiosk agreed). Or one could distribute just the CD, at even lower price, either through bookstores or through music-CD stores. One could also have book review magazines circulating in this format (since regular book-review magazines might want to include or exclude books distributed that way, but might be themselves much more expensive than the books they reviewed). Senior, well known, book reviewers sending readers to the sites of, initially, less well known authors, might be intellectuals that just hold in esteem the content of those books and the role of this content for the individual reader and for society's brainscape. But sites are kept at trivial cost, so why is the leaflet for a price needed at all? Well, some people have a bad feeling of being watched by invisible electronic big brothers when they download and some, both among the same and other, people do feel like rewarding/helping the writers and the distributors for their effort; also like rewarding/helping the editors too, if any of them show up to work under these rules. These rules are not anything new, they're the rules by which sidewalk performers (musicians, magicians, acrobats, actors, ...) pass around the hat: all bystanders watch the show, some pay; more than the ones who pay are affected by it (just like fewer than the people who do pay an expensive theater's ticket are affected by a play). So no complaint from anybody. Well, on sidewalk one pays according to how much he can afford and how much he liked what he watched, not in advance. But a comics is so cheap that one just has to say, in retrospect, that if he liked it very much he just buys more than one and gives the rest as gifts to friends (of course he can also give copies he himself makes of the CD he bought or he was given by somebody else for free). The plan just proposed, which if shared by many authors is of course a plan for "publisher suicide for the sake of free, or at least less expensive, and higher quality education for wide audiences", goes hand in hand with a proposal in the direction of making cheap book-shape laptops without a keyboard, with only page-change button, as easily useable as a book one leafs sitting in an armchair, i.e. laptops that are friendly to e.g. people of the non computer-friendly generation (and also are friendly to their pocket. Maybe "old timers" do not want to also buy technology they're not going to need if they only want to use a PC for reading CD's. Without reference to keyboard & modem wouldn't such reading be cheaper?) Also, one doesn't need to be an old timer to prefer to use less paper and to want to be more educated, less expensively, and by less profit-oriented authors and publishers. Also, rewritable CD's, for books and newspapers, are more easily recycled than paper. Overall, this is not a proposal for suicide to publishers, just a proposal for suicide of many functions of them. They can very well be reborn in new form and stay alive, we repeat. So the reading gadget proposal is a proposal to all editors and concerning all books. Technical upshot: A reading gadget can help towards the return of the idyllic days before "the end of the intellectuals" (almost) as much as the contents of the books to be cheaply read through it.

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