

The Definition of Media Intellectuals -- from the Point of View of the Historical Relationship Between Intellectuals and Media

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Abstract—In this essay, the author will first explore the origins of the term “intellectual”. Then, the discussion will be focused on how the relationship between intellectuals and media has evolved, especially in China. At last, based on the previous analysis, the essay will specify how media intellectual should be defined in the current media environment. The aim of this essay is to elucidate the identity of media intellectuals for media practitioners and researchers.

Key words—*Intellectual, Media, Media-intellectual, Definition*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the face of the increasing popularity of mass media and ubiquitous media information, how do people identify, sort out and obtain effective information? Media practitioners are adapting to changing times in order to create a perfect public image, and intellectuals also enter the media field to seek solutions.

II. THE ORIGINS OF “INTELLECTUAL”

The academic community generally agrees that there are two origins of the term “intellectual”. The first prevailing opinion holds that the term “intelligentsia” originates from the Russian word интеллигенция that occurred in nineteenth-century Russia. During that time, Russia was a backward country compared to the western world. There was a group of people who came from Russian high society but were western educated and thus equipped with western knowledge. With such spirit and attitude to examine Russia's backward autocratic system, they thought that the society in which they were living was ugly and unreasonable. They consequently developed a strong sense of alienation from the then implemented order and had a desire to rebel against it. Such group of people who were strong critical thinkers, morally in particular, with a sense of alienation from mainstream society were called intellectuals.” [1] Yu Ying-shih has given a description about the five characteristics of Russian intellectuals: —Firstly, they were concerned about all issues concerning public interest. Secondly, they considered all issues of their country and of the common good to be their personal responsibility. Thirdly, they intended to interpret political and social issues as moral issues. Fourthly, with a sense of obligation, they pursued the ultimate logical conclusion at all costs. Last but not least, they were convinced that if things were unreasonable, they had to spare no effort to make them right.” [2]

The second origin of “intellectual” is the famous Dreyfus Affair in France in 1894. —Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a French Jewish, was accused of selling French Army’s intelligence to Germany. The court-martial found him guilty of treason and thus sentenced him to lifelong hard labor and exiled him to an island. Later, the evidence proved that Dreyfus had been falsely charged. The court martial nonetheless refused to amend the verdict because of Dreyfus’s Jewish background.” [3]—It was not until 1906 that the court acknowledged its mistake and rehabilitated Dreyfus”. [4]Before this rehabilitation came, a group of literati driven by social conscience and a sense of justice, such as Zola and Hugo, had stood up for Dreyfus by writing articles to denunciate the injustice. They —published an article known as the Manifesto of Intellectuals on 23 January 1898. Since then, those who defended social justice and criticized social injustice were addressed scornfully by their enemies as intellectuals” [5].

III. THE HISTORICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INTELLECTUALS AND MEDIA

The relationship between intellectuals and media can be traced back to long time ago. Throughout the history, the footprints of intellectuals have been engraved on media carriers. However, the limitations of the media at that time made it difficult for intellectuals’ opinions to reach out to a larger number of masses. The relationship between intellectuals and media was therefore almost neglected by the public. Not until the popularization of televisions did people pay attention to it. The earliest definition of media-intellectuals could be found in Bourdieu's “television-intellectual” theory that is confined to the television medium. Bourdieu wrote in his work *On Television*: —By giving the floor to thinkers who are considered able to think at high speed, isn’t television doomed to never have anything but fast-thinkers, thinkers who think faster than a speeding bullet...?” He then concluded that —television rewards a certain number of fast-thinkers who offer cultural fast food — pre-digested and pre-thought culture. [6]” The —fast thinkers” here are, in essence, the so-called —television-intellectuals”.

Dana Polan dubbed such phenomenon as —the mediatization of the intellectual”. She pointed out that with their intriguing appearances, media repeat some processes of mediatization with regularity —an intellectual claims falsifications or distortions

in the work of another intellectual; debate rages, is reported on in one or another of those periodicals that belong to what Fred Pfeil terms the professional-managerial class...Finally, a mass media periodical reports on the debate, usually leaving it in irresolution and usually representing the drama of the debate through close-up photographs of the protagonists. With this appearance in the media, the debate vanishes from critical priority so as to allow attention to ready itself for the next scandal or controversy.[7]"

In China, thanks to the printing technique and paper-making technology, newspapers and magazines flourished. Many scholars and writers published their serialized literary works and articles on these paper media. Between the end of 19th century and the beginning of 20th century, China was in a state of volatility. Some responsible literati used their pens as daggers and javelins to condemn injustice and unfairness, and to repeatedly enlighten the unenlightened masses. This trend not only facilitated the forming of initial philosophies and principles as to how to run a newspaper, but also reflected aspiring scholars' influence on the society and sense of responsibility. Looking back at China's turbulent times over the last century, the advent and thriving of mass media was no less than a ray of sunlight that lit up a dark sky. In the late Qing dynasty, mass media with newspaper as the dominant form allowed the political criticism made by scholars inside Imperial Academy to spread nationwide and thus to influence public opinions. Chinese scholars who used to focus on study and official careers begun to leverage the new media power to play their roles on the historical stage and to discuss social affairs and contribute to social development. During that period, the interactions between the literati and mass media were in the interest of people.

However, after more than fifty years of high-speed technological and cultural developments, by the end of the 1990s and especially in the new century, as the information age has arrived, the pervasive consumerism and the erosion of marketization and commercialization have triggered gradual changes in modern literati's identity and values. Humanistic intellectuals, who used to act as enlighteners who transmitted wisdom, imparted knowledge and resolved doubts, have played less the roles of "legislators" and "interpreters" but more of "coders" and "decoders" who are responsible for producing media symbols in the modern media mechanism.

When confronted with the collapse of the traditional value system and the deconstruction of the moral paradigm, with the public's taunts and contempt towards the "elite culture" and "highbrow culture", with the public's fondness of vulgar productions and kitsch to the extent that they have become hot topics for leisure-time discussion and people voluntarily spread them, with cultural chaos that confounds right with wrong and misleads the public, what should we do? Should we bow to the historic trends, i.e. "following the market and the crowd", and endure the information pollution generated by people who have no opinions of their own but simply follow the herd? Or should we raise our arms and shout "I will break through difficulties in order to safeguard the truth?"

Indeed, the reason why a scholar becomes a scholar is because he or she excels at certain aspects. Although today's information society is infused with a hodgepodge of good and bad information, with the academic spirit, scholars remain faithful to the truth and pursue the truth untiringly. Thanks to them, cultural chaos has not developed into the worst-case scenario. Scholars take up social responsibility and historic mission by transforming themselves into media-intellectuals and utilizing the power of mass media to turn the tide and rectify the ugly side of cultural transmission.

IV. THE DEFINITION OF MEDIA-INTELLECTUALS

What is media-intellectual? According to Yihong Wang from the Media Research Institute of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, "in a broad sense, media-intellectuals can be defined as those in the intellectual class who use mass communication as the main means of communication and mass media and new media as the main communication tools, and who have doubts, anxiety, criticism and even despair when reflecting upon the reality of human communication during the process of the mediatization of cultural transmission in the environment of mediatization. In a narrow sense, media-intellectuals pertain to those who have forged closest relationships with media, who have the ability to interact with both the mass media and the Internet media, and who have the potential to influence the society and build direct connections with media by producing and transmitting information via mass media .[8]" The major characteristic of media-intellectuals is the way in which they participate in society and express their ideas, i.e. frequent presence on the mass media in order to spread their opinions and make clear their positions.

At the very beginning, the intellectuals are just aware of the effects of mass media and at the modern times, the intellectuals take the best of newspapers and magazines to enlighten the people. After the above analysis, the author analyzes the current role of intellectuals in mass media so as to analyze the main structure of medium intellectuals. The results are that there are three types of intellectuals actively involved in mass media industry: scholars, medium people/scholars and successful businessmen. With the ever accelerating growth of mass media industry, the technology development offers convenient and reliable support for the development of medium intellectuals. The mass media industry needs medium intellectuals not only to improve credibility and brand value of media programs, but also to provide solutions and raise the cognition efficiency. Meanwhile, medium intellectuals are also eager to spread the knowledge and comment on whatever is happening.

During the development of medium intellectuals, the nature has been changed with the effect of various obstacles. The author explores the reason for the changes and finds that intellectuals that go for the media are lured by the commercial effects of the media. Meanwhile, some pseudo-intellectuals are blended into this group and some intellectuals' self-awareness has weakened. On the other hand, some intellectuals are indulged in their own research world and refuse to shoulder their social responsibility.

The “lost” image that medium intellectuals should bring back and it is urgent to rebuild the image. Medium intellectuals should cooperate, not conspire with the media; should instruct, not induce the audience and finally should find the way back to being medium intellectuals with self-awareness and self-cognition.

It is not a one-day job to cultivate the rationality of medium intellectuals. It is a process with continuous questioning and rethinking. The author’s definition of medium intellectuals is derived from the historical and present views: They are different from the superior elites and not the “television intellectuals” defined by Bourdieu. They spread their academic findings to more audience through mass media. They refuse to turn their complaints about the current social orders into understanding without rejection, calmness without fighting and acceptance without agreement. They want to be independent intellectuals with self-awareness who will express their views as experts through the scientific research.

To conclude, the real medium intellectuals are not accessories to the business or the spokesman of media or observers of the public. They volunteer to eliminate the limits of media by using media. In doing so, they will perform their social responsibility as solution providers. During the development of medium intellectuals, although some intellectuals have avoided mass media due to the twisted commercial effects, these phenomena are just part of their growth. The real medium intellectuals will be mature and strong with more social experience, public supervision, knowledge and increasing self-cognition.

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