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An Invitation to Reflexive Blogging

SEPT. 24, 2012

Greetings OrgTheory readers—I'm Tom Medvetz, sociologist at UC-San Diego. My thanks to Katherine Chen and the other site members for inviting me to write a few guest posts now that my book *Think Tanks in America* has come out. I'll discuss some particulars of the book in later posts, but I want to start out with some broad context.

Because I study experts, intellectuals, and professionals, I spend a lot of time—too much, probably— thinking about the relationships among sociologists. And while peaceful and collaborative relationships are my favorite kind, it's the opposite kind—the ones marked by antagonism and mutual suspicion—that tend to capture most of my attention. Let me focus on a specific kind of criticism that seems to have become increasingly common, at least in casual discussions among sociologists. I'm referring to the criticism efficiently conveyed in the term *mesearch*.* (For other discussions of this topic, see here, here, and here.)

To adapt C. Wright Mills' language, "mesearch" means stopping your car on Autobiography Avenue somewhere short of the intersection with History Road.† It's undeniably a term of abuse—and a fundamental one at that—the suggestion being that the work in question is more memoir than social science. No social scientist wants to be accused of having done mesearch.

But the idea also contains certain obvious complexities. When I was a sociology graduate student at Berkeley, for example, folkloric tales about Erving Goffman still echoed through the department hallways. And inevitably these stories focused on his notoriously difficult and combative personality.‡ Even more intriguingly, the *main point* of the stories was often that Goffman's personal idiosyncrasies, aversions, and predilections were linked in intelligible ways to the insights contained in his work. Consider the following passage from Dmitri Shalin's interview with former Goffman student Arlene Kaplan Daniels (itself taken from UNLV's extensive Erving Goffman Archive):

> **DS:**   I believe that Erving [Goffman]'s entire corpus is crypto-autobiographical, [starting with] his early article on manipulating class symbols that he wrote when he'd dated Schuyler. . . who came from a high society.
>
> **AD:**   Yes, and he was a guttersnipe.

Now, whether or not Goffman was a "guttersnipe," the suggestion seems to be that his scholarly insights about subterranean codes of meaning, hidden status struggles, and ulterior motives flowed directly from his own sensitivities and experiences. Put differently, Goffman's greatness as a sociologist was built, not on a simple distance from mesearch, but on a complex flirtation with it.

"What are you looking at?"

What does this have to do with the topic I was enlisted to write about—my research on think tanks? Now that the book is out, I find it easier to reflect on the study's origins and my own motives for writing it. When I do, it's clear to me that the book is indeed part of a very personal (and ongoing) attempt to understand what it means to be an "intellectual."

Why would this question be pressing to me? Without subjecting you to many details of my own autobiography—and without implying that it's been marked by any particular sort of exclusion or deprivation—I think it's relevant that the very idea of an "intellectual" remained completely foreign to me at least until I was in college. In the rural setting where I grew up (in which cows outnumbered people, the

Appalachian Trail intersected a nearby road, and oceanic cornfields were the main backdrop), aspiring "intellectuals" were few and far between. In 11th grade, a local vo-tech recruiter visited my class to extol the virtues of a career in air-conditioning repair. He opened his spiel with a question: "How many of you think you'll ever make $100,000 a year?" A few hands went up. "Well," he said, "I'm here to tell you that you probably won't."

To me and my classmates, there was nothing surprising about this exercise in aspiration management, and nothing insulting about the recruiter's dim view of our earning potential.§ (In fact, having never being a fan of euphemisms, I remember being more irked by the vo-tech guy's repeated use of the phrase *climate control* instead of *air-conditioning*.)

So if, as Loïc Wacquant has suggested, many sociologists enter the field "in reaction to a succession of 'culture shocks' at key junctures" in their lives, then my primary culture shock was my aberrant encounter with the world of higher education itself. This was where I first encountered "intellectuals," by which I mean people who seemed to regard the accumulation of knowledge as a vocation in and of itself.

If I were to tell you, then, that *Think Tanks in America* is ultimately part of my attempt to understand a social species that remained foreign to me even as I began the study—but also that the study was part of the process of *certifying my own membership* in that group (since it began as my dissertation), then am I guilty of mesearch? I hope not. I'm not a character in the book, and sociologists in general appear only as shadowy figures at the outskirts. Yet make no mistake: while the book focuses on a set of agents who currently overshadow social scientists in policy debates (viz. self-styled "policy experts"—about which I'll say more later), my interest in the topic was driven by my relationships to both groups.

File photo: In the process of cataloging the properties of an unfamiliar species, a man (left) mutates into a member of that species.

The questions remain: What's the peculiar alchemy through which a set of deeply personal interests and motivations becomes a properly social scientific product? And where's the line between research and mesearch?

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* In the unlikely event that you don't know this phrase, I'll define it as the form of scholarly self-absorption that consists in passing off an account of one's own life experience as social research. For a parodic representation of mesearch, see *The Onion*. 2001. "Sociologist Considers Own Behavior Indicative Of Larger Trends." March 7.)

† Or if you happen to share Mills' vehicular preferences: your motorcycle.

‡ For a more nuanced picture of Goffman, see the wealth of materials (including personal recollections and interviews with friends, students, and confidants) available at UNLV's Erving Goffman Archive.

§ In 1993, a pretax household income of \$100,000 put the earner between the 90th and 95th percentiles in the American income structure.

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"From totally geek to totally chic"

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Hi, Tom Medvetz here with Round 2 of my guest stint at OrgTheory.

Here's a trivia question for you: What do actors George Clooney, Angelina Jolie, and Warren Beatty share in common with former heads of state Mikhail Gorbachev, Bill Clinton, George H.W. Bush, and Eduard Shevardnadze?* If you guessed that they're all members of the Council on Foreign Relations—the think tank with arguably the greatest impact on American foreign policy since its founding in 1921—then you're correct. Here's a related query: What does an aging film star like Arnold Schwarzenegger do with himself after having already dabbled in such varied pursuits as bodybuilding; marrying a Kennedy; serving two-terms as governor of California, and alternately threatening and then protecting the human race in its battle against time-traveling cyborgs?†

The answer, of course, is to start a think tank. This week, "the Governator"—together with the University of Southern California—launched the Schwarzenegger Institute for State and Global Policy, a bipartisan center focused on five policy areas: "education, energy and environment, fiscal and economic policy, health and human wellness, and political reform."‡

"I'll be back… –ing public policies and conducting research on matters of broad political and economic importance."

Against all odds, some sort of "think tank chic" seems to have developed in the U.S. in recent years.§ How should we interpret this? And in general, how might we think about a think tank's role within the broader social relations of power?

On these questions, consider again the Council on Foreign Relations, whose current membership roster includes luminaries from the worlds of business (e.g. Richard Branson, Frederick W. Smith)¶; media (Roger Ailes, Rupert Murdoch, Oprah Winfrey, David Geffen, and Brian Grazer); academia (political

scientist Peter Katzenstein, economist Martin Feldstein), and politics. In the latter category are numerous former National Security Advisers (Zbigniew Brzezinski, Henry Kissinger, Colin Powell); past and present Supreme Court Justices (Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Sandra Day O'Connor); and former Secretaries of State (Madeleine Albright, Hillary Clinton, Condoleeza Rice).

At first glance, CFR would seem like an organization drawn directly from one of C. Wright Mills' fevered nightmares—the very nerve center of the "power elite." It should not be surprising, then, that the first major scholarly studies of think tanks were conducted in the 1970s by political sociologists following closely in Mills' tradition, including G. William Domhoff. And as anyone familiar with the "power elite" perspective would guess, these scholars portrayed think tanks as instruments in a more or less coordinated ruling class project. (The Council Foreign Relations in particular, in these studies, became something like the Bohemian Grove of the Upper East Side.)

In my recently-published book on think tanks, however, I argue that this view is too simplistic. Crucially, however, I don't revert to the perspective that became the standard alternative to elite theory in the 1970s and '80s: namely, the pluralist approach associated with scholars like Nelson Polsby and Robert Dahl. When the pluralists studied think tanks, they tended to depict them in more or less opposite terms—as lofty sanctuaries for independent reflection and analysis. A "true think tank," wrote Polsby, "obliges its inhabitants to follow their own intellectual agendas."**

I agree with the elite theorists on two key points: first, that *class interests* have a clear primacy in shaping the social relations in which think tanks are embedded; and second, that most think tanks are (and always have been) unambiguously elite in their composition. What's my quarrel with the elite theory approach, then?

Two things: In the first place, I'd point out that while most of the key figures in the think tank world are indeed elites (however you like to define the term), their organizations never simply represent the "ruling class" as a whole—only specific fractions of it. Put differently, after a certain point, the breadth of the elite concept becomes a major hindrance. The more we expand our notion of "the elite" to include all of the relevant fractions, the less we can simply take for granted their affinity.

Which fraction(s) of the elite think tanks represent, and in what proportions, are always the relevant questions.

Second, the modality of the encounter among think tank-affiliated elites is never one of simple harmony, but also one of "horizontal" struggle. Specific elite subgroups collaborate in the making of think tanks, but often in the context of struggles against other elites. Even within specific think tanks, cooperation often accompanies internecine struggles for control over an organization's agenda.

Both of these points suggested to me the need for a more open-ended, historical approach. As I show in the book, the most influential think tanks of the postwar era (like the Brookings Institution) were built on partnerships of politically moderate capitalists, aspiring civil servants, and a technocratic fraction of the intelligentsia. In matters of economic policy, they were typically Keynesian—which, crucially, placed them in opposition to certain other elites, especially businessmen committed to an aggressively free market vision of capitalism and libertarian economists. However, the latter groups flooded the think tank arena in the 1970s and '80s and became its dominant figures.

In the book, I break with the Millsian approach by replacing the *elite* concept with the idea of the *field of power*. (Briefly, this is Pierre Bourdieu's term for the social space in which powerful agents and groups collaborate and compete to determine which resources will be considered the most legitimate and valuable in modern societies.) Applied here, the purpose of the concept is to encourage us to think about think tanks as sites of collaboration and struggle among holders of various forms of power. At stake in the encounter isn't just the *accumulation* of power (as the elite theorists would have it) but the *relative values* of its different forms (e.g. money, bureaucratic authority, political expertise, social scientific knowledge, and, increasingly, media access and publicity).

Gene Sperling (JD, Yale University and director, U.S. National Economic Council) and Angelina Jolie (star of Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life) discuss "Iraq, Education, and Children of Conflict" at an April 2008 Council on Foreign Relations event.††

This point brings us back to my original question: Why are think tanks suddenly popular among celebrities, journalists, media moguls, and others who control access to the means of publicity? I believe the trend is indicative of a broader shift in American politics toward growing responsiveness to the media. I'll return to this theme in a future post, but for now let me recommend two recent books on the topic that deserve more attention: Ron Jacobs and Eleanor Townsley's *The Space of Opinion* and Jeffrey Alexander's *The Performance of Politics*.‡‡

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NOTES

* Shevardnadze was president of the republic of Georgia from 1995 to 2003.

† Or so I gather from the extraordinarily convoluted Wikipedia synopses of the four *Terminator* films, three of which featured Schwarzenegger, and only one of which I remember actually watching from start to finish. More vivid in my memory, however, is Schwarzenegger's synergistically brilliant appearance as the T-800 cyborg in the 1991 Guns N' Roses video for "You Could Be Mine" (which was also included on the *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* soundtrack).

‡ The quote is from "USC and Arnold Schwarzenegger Announce New Institute on State and Global Policy." Retrieved on September 26, 2012.

§ I say "against all odds" because of the manifestly boring work carried out at most think tanks. I remember, for example, the reply given to me by one of my thesis advisers, Jerry Karabel, who was already quite knowledgeable about think tanks, when I suggested doing ethnographic observation at a think tank: "Okay, but I'm just afraid that it would be kind of like watching paint dry."

¶ Not to mention CFR's extensive corporate membership list.

** Nelson Polsby. 1983. "Tanks but no Tanks." *Public Opinion* April/May: 14–16, 58–59.

†† To be fair, Ms. Jolie has served as a United Nations Goodwill Ambassador, a role that was critical in securing her CFR membership. On the other hand, I have no idea what Warren Beatty did to earn his invitation to CFR (or whether it involved Carly Simon).

‡‡ Bonus trivia question: I did not plan, and am powerless to explain, the emergent film motif in my OrgTheory posts thus far (starting here). And while I should probably rein it in a little, let me point out that the title of this post refers to another late 1980s movie—and that the first commenter to name that movie will earn the title "Distinguished Fellow of Film Policy Studies" at my think tank, should I ever start one. (No Google-cheating allowed.)

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Dude, here's my social theory

OCT. 4, 2012

Hi, Tom Medvetz here with my third guest installment for OrgTheory.* In this little excursion, I'll extend the "Dude, where's my social theory?" discussion that's been percolating on the site over the last couple of months. The main points of that conversation, which originated with Kieran Healy's August 22 post and continued more recently in Fabio's posts (here and here) were that: (1) the category "theorist" seems to be disappearing as an occupational position in American sociology, and that (2) fewer sociologists identify themselves as theorists.

There's no denying the basic fact underpinning the first point: namely, that the number of jobs with the label "theorist" attached to them has gone down in American sociology over the last few decades. Kieran posits that one result of this trend is growing semantic confusion over the meaning of the term *theory*:

> As a consequence, many people are not sure what, from a disciplinary point of view, theory in sociology is supposed to be any more, or how it should be done, or what if anything distinguishes it from intellectual history, or philosophy, or normative political theory, or humanities-style 'Theory,' or mathematical modeling.

I agree—this is probably true. However, it's worth pointing out that semantic confusion is neither a necessary nor a ubiquitous feature of the shift being discussed. Furthermore, when we start to think about what it means to "do theory," the discussion takes on a different cast and the issue of "theory's" status as an occupational position becomes secondary.

I'd begin by noting a seeming exception to proposition #2 above: namely, the recent growth of a vibrant network of young sociologists who identify themselves explicitly as "theorists"—best signaled by the popularity of the ASA Theory section's Junior Theorist Symposium. Started in 2005 by Neil Gross and

Michèle Lamont and resumed in 2008 after a two-year hiatus, the event has grown steadily over the past few years. The list of past "senior theorist" discussants includes Andrew Abbott, Jeffrey Alexander, Craig Calhoun, Randall Collins, Phil Gorski, Richard Swedberg, Ann Swidler, Loïc Wacquant, Andreas Wimmer, and Viviana Zelizer.†

Of course, the popularity of the JTS doesn't contradict the fact that there are fewer jobs for "theory" specialists. But it does raise another question already anticipated in Kieran's post: Who are these people, and what do they mean by "theory"? On this general topic, Kieran writes that, "Crudely, the sort of people who once would have thought of themselves. . . primarily as theorists now think of themselves as sociologists of culture instead, or (less often) as disciplinary historians of ideas." Is this true? Certainly there's a lot of overlap among these areas—theory, culture, and the history of ideas—in terms of ideas and personnel. Nevertheless, I think there remains, both in the JTS events and in other work done under the banner of "theory" today, a coherent mission that's not reducible to the sociology of culture per se, or to the history of ideas. It's also something that can't be expressed in terms of an opposition between "theoretical" and "empirical" work. I'm referring to the specific focus on the task of analytic construction, including the work of formulating rigorous concepts, historicizing the categories of one's research (not for its own sake, but as an ongoing feature of their implementation), and taking into account their social effects. And I'd submit that the level of appreciation for these things in American sociology is more important than the specific fate of "theory" as a subdiscipline.

I can clarify this point by returning to the topic I've been discussing on this blog: think tanks. Doubtless the two most common questions I get about my research in this area are: (1) "Which think tanks did you study?" and (2) "Would you consider [*organization X*] a think tank?" These are both perfectly good questions, and they have something important in common: they're both fundamentally about category boundaries. The first question is essentially, "What is the boundary of your study?", and the second is, "What is the boundary of the *think tank* category?" The only thing I don't like about these questions is that there's no easy 30-second "elevator version" answer to either of them. That's because one of the contributions of my study, as I see it, is precisely to build a rigorous analytic concept of a think tank that lays bare some of the hidden features of the reigning *political folk concept*.

I say 'build a rigorous concept,' but I don't mean build from scratch. In my case, this has meant applying and extending existing sociological concepts like *network* and *field*. And while space limitations prevent me from going into detail here, the conception of a think tank that I develop in the book is decidedly "practice-oriented" (to use a fashionable phrase): To be a think tank, I say, is to become ensnared in a never-ending game of separation and attachment vis-à-vis the more established institutions of academia, politics, business, and the media. Think tanks must constantly signal their "independence" from these institutions, on which they depend for resources, personnel, and legitimacy, even as they use their *associations* with each one to mark their putative separation from the other institutions. It's from this idea that I develop a description of "policy research" as a hybrid practice of generating policy prescriptions while competing with other think tanks for donations, press coverage, and political attention.

Why the need to be so "theoretical"? At one level, it allowed me to ask certain important but neglected questions about think tanks. By separating the analytic concept from the political folk concept, I could treat the latter's growing use in American public and political life as something that needed to be explained. And because some of the organizations now included in the folk category predate the think tank classification by more than 60 years, the process I'm referring to isn't reducible to a simple story of organizational creation. Instead, it was a complex process of network formation. The term *think tank* became meaningful only when a formerly disparate array of organizations became oriented to one another in their judgments and practices, and only when the members of this network developed novel intellectual products to separate themselves from more established institutions.

So being "theoretical" allowed me to focus on the social relations underpinning the emergence of think tanks. At another level, it allowed me to avoid what I saw as the main pitfall in the study of think tanks: the danger of inadvertently becoming harnessed to the interests of think tanks and their affiliated "policy

experts." As I say in the book, "orphaning the think tank for operational purposes subtly harnesses the scholar to its mission because the think tank's first goal, even prior to that of exercising political influence, is to differentiate itself from its nearest neighbors in social space."

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What's the connection between all this and the "Dude, where's my theory?" discussion? Two summary points:

(1) The status of sociological theory is different from its distinctiveness as an occupational position.

I agree with the gist of the previous discussion as it appears in the posts I linked to above—and there's nothing in it that contradicts this point. Nor would I deny the importance of the issue raised by Kieran and Fabio. Nevertheless, it seems to me that more relevant than whether or not "theorist" is in decline as an occupational position are some other issues anticipated in Kieran's original post: inter alia, how strongly do American sociologists appreciate the importance of constructing rigorous analytic concepts? Do we reward those who take seriously the effects of classification systems, including the ones used by social scientists? Is it mandatory or merely optional to subject the conceptual dimension of your own work to relentless self-questioning? The presence or absence of people who specialize in these things might be indicators of theory's health or sickness. But insofar as we're all theorists, it's not a perfect one.

(2) I ♥ empirical data.

The notion of "theory" I'm suggesting here (which is far from original) isn't built on an opposition between "theoretical" and "empirical" work. In fact, in my own experience, being "theoretical" has meant having to gather *more* data, not less. Or, to be blunt, I didn't spend two years in the swamp of Washington, DC visiting dozens of think tanks, interviewing their staff members, rooting through their archives, building a database of the educational and career backgrounds of over 1,000 think tank-affiliated policy experts, attending their public events, and even finagling my way into some of their private ones—like some kind of low-rent Irwin M. Fletcher—to be labeled "non-empirical" (if that's what's implied in the term "theoretical").

The author (left, in disguise) gathering empirical data.

Nevertheless, the theoretical component of my study, by which I mean the work of analytic construction, required its own effort. If nothing else, it should be clear by now that lurking behind questions like, "Which think tanks did you study?" is a whole series of other questions for which commonsense answers aren't sufficient.‡ As I put it in the book, "for those involved in the world of policy research and advocacy, the practice of calling one's organization a 'think tank' is rarely a neutral act of self-description. It is also a strategic move in a social game, the rules of which we should try to understand…. [T]o become a think tank is to rise above mere interest-group struggles and claim membership in the ranks of experts."§

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NOTES

* My first and second posts can be found [here](#) and [here](#), respectively.

† My own connection to the JTS is as follows: I presented at the event in 2008; I co-organized it with Michal Pagis in 2011; and I attended all but one of the others.

‡ It should also be clear why any answer I give to these questions might threaten to make my study look like some kind of exercise in "deconstruction." On the first question, consider my two best options. Option #1:

Questioner: Which think tanks did you study?

Me: The book is partly a study of the think tank category itself, by which I mean its emergence in public and political life, its changing boundary, and the historical conditions that made the classification possible.

Questioner: Come again?

Me: I mean that the focus is not so much on the members of a clearly defined organizational "species" or "type," but on the social forces and relations that made this blurry concept thinkable in the first place. Only after having examined this process historically could I identify specific org…

Questioner: Ah… got it. Now go back to your Parisian café, Derrida.

But I'm no poststructuralist—far from it—and insofar as my aim was ever to "deconstruct" anything, including the *think tank* concept, it was only as a prologue to reconstructing it analytically, with lots of empirical data. Which helps to explain why I've become partial to option #2:

Questioner: Which think tanks did you study?

Me: All of them.‡*

§ I fully grasp the key methodological question raised here: viz. If the think tank category is constitutively fuzzy and always in flux, as I say, then how does one decide which organizations to leave in or out of the study? This will/would have to be a topic for another post, but (very) briefly, the working solution in my case was to sample from various locations in the organizational network, including its center and periphery, and then to consider more broadly how this network was situated within bigger social structures.

‡* Plus, as a precautionary measure, I carry around with me a copy of the Empirical Loyalty Oath, which quotes liberally from the Sedition Act of 1918 and reads, in part, "I hereby declare that I am not now, nor have I ever been, a poststructuralist."

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Why the debate on "public intellectuals" is faulty (pt. 1 of 2)

OCT. 12, 2012

Hi, Tom Medvetz here, checking in with my fourth OrgTheory guest post (posts 1, 2, and 3 here). Today I'll sketch a few notes about one of the big issues my book speaks to: the complex relationship between social knowledge and public action in the US. Perhaps the best-known debate on this topic is the one associated with Russell Jacoby's 1987 book, *The Last Intellectuals*, which famously lamented the disappearance of "public intellectuals" from American life. In the years since its publication, Jacoby's book and the idea of the "public intellectual" have earned enormous attention from journalists, pundits, and scholars.

However, reading over some of the major entries in this debate, it's hard to shake the feeling that the "public intellectual" discussion has yielded more heat than light. In the first place, it's striking how much disagreement still attends the central question a quarter-century later: Is public intellectualism declining or thriving in America? It depends on who you ask. Three days ago, Henry Giroux's *Counterpunch* essay "The Disappearance of Public Intellectuals" seemed to take the basic truth of Jacoby's thesis for granted. Meanwhile, many other writers have taken the opposite stance by arguing that public intellectuals are alive and well in the US. A good example is Daniel W. Drezner's 2008 paper "Public Intellectuals 2.0," which maintained that "the growth of online publication venues has stimulated rather than retarded the quality and diversity of public intellectuals."

A second glance at this debate reveals a likely reason for the disagreement. Put simply, there has never been any consensus about the proper definition of the term *public intellectual*. In fact, it's fair to say that how a given writer operationalizes the term tends to determine where he or she stands on the issue.

Is there a way to contribute to this debate without unwittingly producing another round in the potentially endless cycle of laments and celebrations? I think there is, but only by drawing on certain insights from the sociology of intellectuals. In my book, I make use of a conceptual framework with a long pedigree in this area (particularly the work of Weber, Bourdieu, and Gil Eyal*) to relate the rise of think tank-affiliated policy experts to the debate on "public intellectuals." The first contribution this framework offers is to clarify the discussion's conceptual substrate. In particular, it lets us see that the *public intellectual* concept acquires its rhetorical force from two ideas already familiar to scholars of intellectuals. The first is *cognitive autonomy*, by which I mean an intellectual group's ability to enforce positive standards of rigor and competence on its members.
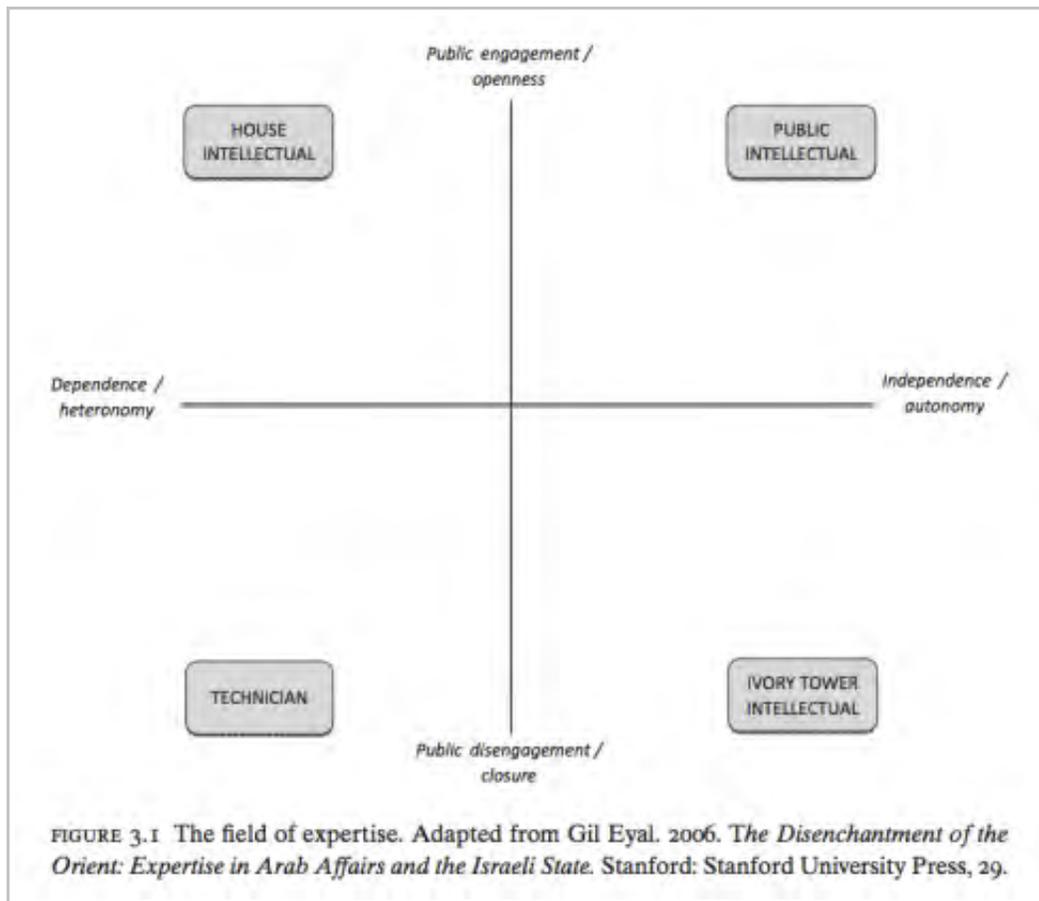
Autonomy is easy to grasp in principle. For example, we could say that doctors enjoy a certain degree of autonomy from patients in their ability to evaluate their medical needs and determine the best course of treatment independently of the patients' opinions. Yet the operative phrase here is "a certain degree." Once we think about real-life cases, it becomes clear that perfect autonomy is neither achievable nor desirable for an intellectual or professional group. The same doctors, for example, always face certain pressures to take into account the preferences of patients before deciding on a diagnosis or treatment. Furthermore—and this is a crucial point—how much pressure an expert group faces depends heavily on the presence or absence of rivals who are willing to tailor their services expressly to "consumer demand." Extending the medical example, we could say that the presence of holistic and New Age healers poses a potential threat to doctors, who can no longer count on being the "only game in town" in treating illness (that is, if they ever could). Doctors might try to co-opt the knowledge of their rivals—witness mainstream

medical exhortations about the value of meditation—or they may challenge its legitimacy. But the key point is that a strategy of uncompromising autonomy leaves an expert group vulnerable to competition from less autonomous rivals.

If membership in a highly autonomous group is vital to "intellectualism," then what could make an intellectual "public"? Here the key notion is what Gil Eyal calls "openness." Openness is the opposite of closure (in the Weberian sense), which refers to a group's ability to control the means of entry into its own ranks and exercise proprietary control over its knowledge through credentialing and training mechanisms. Closure also implies a certain degree of esotericism or "mystery," as when a medical doctor uses an obscure term for an illness or a professor relies on arcane jargon to make an argument. Both acts sharpen the distinction between the doctor and the layperson. The concept *public intellectual*, on the other hand, suggests a certain willingness to "give away" one's knowledge by speaking in a language that is accessible to an educated lay public.

Once again, though, we can see why openness is no simple matter, and why it poses a second dilemma for intellectuals. Just as too much closure leads to pure esotericism (and potentially the loss of clients), too much openness leads to the loss of proprietary control over one's knowledge (and the material and symbolic rewards that come with it). Think, for example, of everyday folk wisdom, which is freely available to everyone and therefore "owned" by no one.

The figure below (pasted from my book and adapted from Eyal) summarizes this framework by depicting the two oppositions I've described as axes in a theoretical space of relations. Bourdieu's contribution to this discussion is to suggest that what Weber referred to as "ideal-types" are better thought of as *unstable corner locations* in a field of forces and relations. In other words, because the corners of the space are the most dangerous places for real-life intellectuals to exist, most of the "action" occurs closer to the center. As Bourdieu notes, once we've used the ideal-types to specify the dimensions of the space and the forces brought to bear on those who enter it, we can discard the ideal-types altogether. Eyal's contributions are to clarify the dilemmas associated with the two axes and to emphasize the powerful allure of the field's *center*. An expert group that wants to keep its consumers, he says, must strike tactical *balances* between autonomy and heteronomy and openness and closure.

FIGURE 3.1 The field of expertise. Adapted from Gil Eyal. 2006. *The Disenchantment of the Orient: Expertise in Arab Affairs and the Israeli State*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 29.

From Think Tanks in America*, p. 86*

The model sketched here suggests why endless confusion over the status of "public intellectuals" is not surprising—and why writings on the topic often devolve into futile battles over the "true" meaning of the term. In the first place, there are no natural boundaries within this space, only degrees of autonomy and openness. Furthermore, real social agents and groups always have an interest in demarcating the boundary of categories like *public intellectual* in particular ways. When Russell Jacoby writes, for example, that public intellectualism is in decline because of the "professionalization and academization" of scholars, it's hard to read this as merely a neutral description of the world. It is also part of an attempt to decry one kind of academic career path in relation to another.

In my book, I use this model to describe the strategic repertoires of think tank-affiliated "policy experts," which tend to draw them toward the field's center. At one point, I focus on the case of AEI fellow Charles Murray (*Losing Ground*, *The Bell Curve*). Murray's successful intervention in the 1980s-90s welfare debate depended not on his ability to represent a specific intellectual "type," but on his ability to exist *in between* types by merging disparate skills and styles strategically. Murray entered the debate in the early 1980s with all the outward appearances of a "public intellectual," or someone who could challenge the political orthodoxy of the day from a standpoint of relative autonomy while speaking in terms that were accessible to the lay public. But he also gained a degree of authority from the appearance of technical proficiency that came from his experience as a former government analyst. Once Republicans took control of Congress in 1994, however, Murray repositioned himself as a crusader and spokesman for the anti-welfare movement by testifying before Congress and serving on an official White House commission convened to move the legislation forward. There is even a hint of "ivory tower" scholasticism in Murray's story. (As he told me in an interview, "In the think tank world . . . I have—and this is not really an exaggeration—I have essentially spent the last 21 years doing exactly as I pleased, every day and all day.")
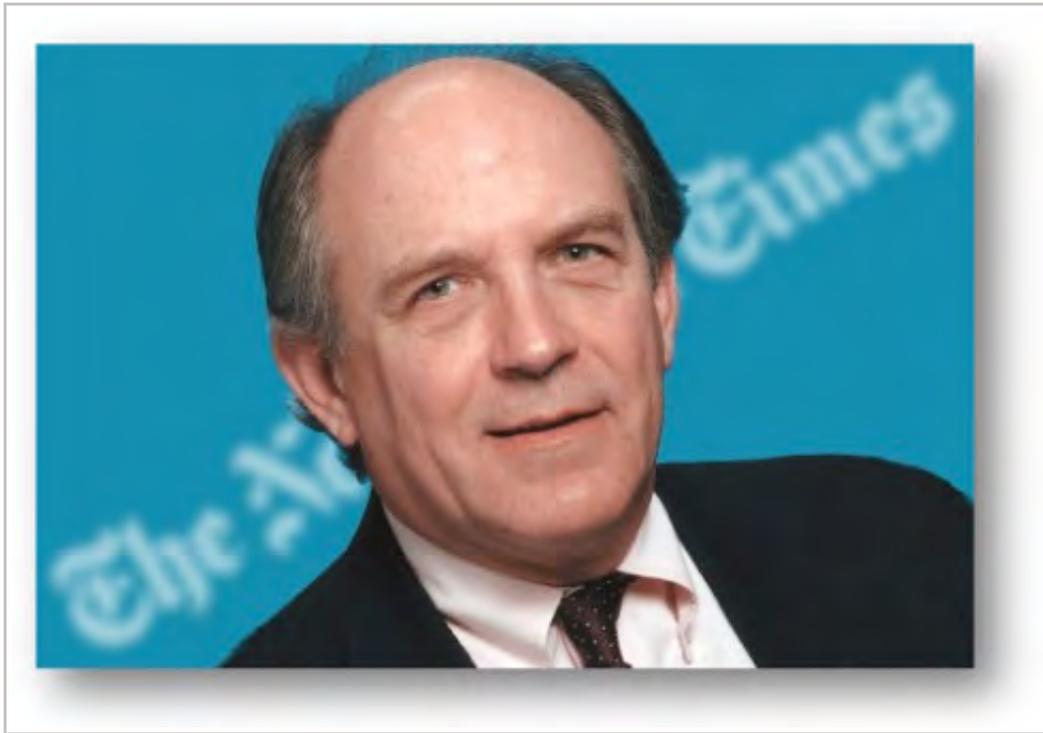
Public intellectual?: AEI fellow Charles Murray, described as both an "exemplary social scientist" by Christopher DeMuth (in his [Irving Kristol Award](#) presentation) and a "conservative evildoer" and producer of "racist pseudo-science" by Eric Alterman (in [What Liberal Media?](#)*)*

The key point is that the field's center is the best position from which to fend off challenges from rivals and maintain a stable clientele.

To move the public intellectualism debate forward, I think we should resist the impulse to treat the agent as the privileged unit of analysis. A public intellectual is not a flesh-and-blood person, nor even an ideal-type. Instead, the term is better understood as referring to an unstable corner location in a space of relations. A better approach, then, is to trace the relationships among real intellectual and professional groups within this space historically. In my next post, I'll proceed with this task in more detail. [To be continued….]

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NOTE

* See, for example, Gil Eyal. 2002. "Dangerous Liaisons between Military Intelligence and Middle Eastern Studies in Israel." *Theory and Society* 31, no. 5: 653–93; Gil Eyal. 2006. *The Disenchantment of the Orient: Expertise in Arab Affairs and the Israeli State.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press; Pierre Bourdieu. 1991. "Universal Corporatism: The Role of Intellectuals in the Modern World." *Poetics Today* 12, no. 4: 655–69.

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Why the debate on "public intellectuals" is faulty (pt. 2 of 2)

NOV. 15, 2012

Hello, OrgTheory readers—Tom Medvetz here, returning after a brief blogging-sabbatical* with my fifth and penultimate guest post. As the title indicates, this post is a continuation of my last one, which focused on the status of so-called "public intellectuals" in the U.S. However, one of my main points in that discussion was that the debate itself—having grown zombie-like (by which I mean lurching aimlessly for a quarter-century, well past its natural lifespan)—deserved critique.†

The Talking Dead: some leading figures in the debate on "public intellectuals"

If you didn't get a chance to read part 1 of this post, here are the main take-home points:

(1) First, I made the far-from-novel observation that any attempt to make meaningful statements about "intellectuals," public or otherwise, is fraught with all kinds of analytic, theoretical, and conceptual difficulties —the main ones being linked to the concept *intellectual* itself (and its closest kin: e.g. *experts, pseudo-intellectuals*, etc.). As Zygmunt Bauman put it, "Any attempt to define intellectuals is an attempt at self-definition."‡ In fact, you could plausibly argue that making a definitive statement about who "truly" counts as an intellectual is in a sense the *ultimate* intellectual act inasmuch as it presupposes a kind of meta-level knowledge about what "real" knowledge is, who really has it, etc.

(2) So I dealt with these issues by invoking an analytic framework snatched directly from the work of Gil Eyal—and the purpose of the framework was to give us a coherent way to talk about the relationships among social actors and groups who make claims to expertise. (Really, you should go back and look at the first post.)

(3) The key point of that framework was that it's useful to think about experts in terms of a field-like space of relations, which Eyal calls the *field of expertise*. For my purposes, the key opposition in that discussion was between two stances intellectuals can take vis-à-vis their audiences: "openness" and "closure." In

this usage, openness is a willingness to produce knowledge that's freely accessible to a non-expert "laity," whereas closure is an expert group's attempt to exercise proprietary control over its knowledge, especially through credentialization, but also by giving its knowledge a degree of esotericism or "mystery."

In my own work, this opposition became relevant when I asked where the *think tank* category came from. Limits of space prevent me from explaining fully why this is a puzzle in the first place, so for the most part you'll have to trust me. But very briefly: part of the issue is that many of the organizations that we now call "think tanks" (e.g. Brookings, CEIP, CFR, NBER) emerged in the 1910s and '20s, decades before anyone classified them as members of the same organizational "species." Other complexities aside, it wasn't until the 1970s that the think tank classification developed in anything resembling its present day form, with postwar military planning groups like the RAND Corporation becoming the early prototypes—and the older, Progressive Era-groups getting lumped in afterwards.

In the book, I argue that the *think tank* classification formed as the result of a merging together of two sets of organizations with competing claims to expertise on matters related to public policy. On the one side were some of the aforementioned organizations, which had by the 1950s claimed for themselves important roles in economic, social, and foreign policy-making affairs. In the absence of a formal technocratic arm of the state, groups like Brookings, CFR, and RAND were centrally involved in devising the social programs of the welfare state, supplying technical assistance to the defense industry, staffing the economic administration, helping to broker deals between management and labor, and so on.

However, the 1960s saw the growth of a major challenge to the authority of technocrats, one led by an emerging set of figures I call *activist-experts*. Doubtless the most provocative part of this claim is that it counts certain sub-factions of the Left and the Right as two sides of the same coin. This isn't to say that they were engaged in a secret conspiracy, only that if we momentarily bracket the ideological differences between them, there are certain nontrivial commonalities that help to illuminate the question at hand. The general point is that both the left- and right-wing movements of the 1960s were animated largely by suspicion toward professionalized rationality and its carriers: i.e. "technocrats."

Of course, the right- and left-wing critiques of technocracy took on very different forms and had different targets. For the New Left, it was the image of the Cold War military planner that became the key symbol of technocracy run amok. (Read the Port Huron Statement for its denunciation of professionalized rationality—or watch the movie *Dr. Strangelove* for its caricaturized representation of a crazed military adviser.) For conservatives, the main technocratic villain was the New Deal welfare state planner. (Read the Sharon Statement for its denunciation of "government interfere[nce] with the work of the market economy"—or watch the movie *Brazil* for its dystopian vision of a suffocating state bureaucracy.)§ In both cases, the argument was that technocratic experts had become too powerful, too unaccountable to the public, and too consumed by their own professional self-interests.

Villainy we can agree on: Deranged nuclear scientist Dr. Strangelove (left), a character often said to have been based on Hudson Institute founder Herman Kahn, and a faceless bureaucrat from Terry Gilliam's Brazil (right).

For me, the idea of the *field of expertise* became useful as a tool for understanding what happened next. First, it's important to recognize that both sets of activists faced the same paradox inherent in any attempt to challenge "expertise": Put simply, to try to undermine the authority of an expert is already to claim for yourself a kind of expertise. It should come as no surprise, then, that with virtually no credentials or academic titles to speak of and no recognized body of authoritative knowledge at their disposal, activists on both sides established hundreds of new nonprofit research centers that served a kind of self-credentialing function. In my formulation, the activists became "activist-experts." In the language of field analysis, they pursued a strategy of *closure* by attempting to "certify" their knowledge and constitute themselves as experts of a new breed.

Among the best examples are the Institute for Policy Studies and the Worldwatch Institute (on the left) and the Heritage Foundation (1971) and the Manhattan Institute (1978) (on the right). The growth of these organizations had major effects for their technocratic predecessors, which increasingly found themselves under scrutiny for their public unaccountability, their secrecy, and their supposed self-interestedness. In the theoretical language I've used, they faced a problem of too much *closure*. Accordingly, they began moving "vertically'" toward the center of the field of expertise by "opening up" their knowledge. Organizations like Brookings, CFR, and RAND, having once tried to operate entirely "behind the scenes," increasingly sought media attention, produced shorter and more accessible writing for the general public, and expanded their memberships.

The result was a kind of structural convergence. Notice that this framework allows us to avoid any essentializing labels for either set of organizations. In fact, the main point is that to the degree that the activist-oriented groups succeeded in getting their policy recommendations taken seriously by politicians (i.e. in becoming political "insiders"), they became more "technocratic" themselves. And vice versa: to the degree that the more technocratic groups engaged in public outreach, they became more like the activist-experts. The overarching result of the convergence, I argue, was that the organizations became increasingly interconnected, more oriented to one another in their judgments and practices, and more focused on common goals and practices. By the 1980s, the distinctions between them had become muddier—and the political folk category *think tank* was born to describe all of them.

What does all this have to do with the debate about "public intellectuals"? First, it suggests a wholesale reframing of that debate. The term *public intellectual* itself is best understood, not as referring to a flesh-and-blood individual, but to a theoretical *position* in a space of relations. Second, it suggests that the period since the 1960s has been marked neither by the "demise of the public intellectual" in any simple sense, nor by the opposite process (i.e. the flowering of public intellectuals), as others have argued. Instead, it has been marked by the appearance of a new intellectual figure known as a "policy expert." Commentators who celebrate policy experts as "public intellectuals" invariably overlook the severe economic and political constraints they face in conducting policy research.

On the other hand, commentators who lament the "death" of public intellectualism typically romanticize the late 1950s and early '60s as its golden age. This was the era of John Kenneth Galbraith, C. Wright Mills, David Riesman, and Richard Hofstadter. However, if the germ of a public intellectual project was incubating then, it represented the *lesser* of the two developing challenges to technocracy. Furthermore, the project's failure cannot be explained in terms of a simple retreat by scholars into the "ivory tower." Unlike the structural convergence between technocrats and activist-experts that gave rise to the "policy expert," the relations among academic scholars since the 1960s have been marked by *divergence*. Whereas some took the path of "hyper-professionalization" (to quote Steve Shapin), others opted to imitate the style of the "policy expert." Yet others still have persisted in a civic-intellectual mission—only to face a *double-marginalization*: first, from American public debate, and second, from the mainstreams of their own disciplines. Meanwhile, the main cause of this divergence, and the primary obstacle to the development of a viable civic-intellectual tradition in the US—viz. the institutionalization of "policy expertise" through the blending of activist and technocratic styles of intellectual production—has gone largely unnoticed.

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NOTES

* Much like blog posts themselves, blogging-sabbaticals are inevitably quite short.

† In retrospect, I should have incorporated a zombie angle into the book—zombies currently being a surefire path to the bestseller list.

‡ Zygmunt Bauman. 1992. "Love in Adversity: On the State and the Intellectuals, and the State of the Intellectuals," *Thesis Eleven* 31: 81-104. Quoted in Jerome Karabel. 1996. "Towards a Theory of Intellectuals and Politics." *Theory and Society* 25: 205-233.

§ Incidentally, one of the original working titles for *Brazil* was (I'm not making this up) *The Ministry of Torture*, Or *How I Learned to Live with the System*—a clear reference to *Dr. Strangelove*'s full title. Also, I should state outright that I'm not suggesting *Brazil* is an inherently "conservative" movie (although I *would* point out that the website Libertarian.com seems to think it is)—and even the somewhat less ideological Cyberpunkreview.com summarizes the film's point in terms of a critique of the welfare state: "In the end, *Brazil* shows how the depths of humanity can be crushed in a dystopic future where individuality and human rights become completely subservient to societal 'welfare.'"

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Blogging Fast and Slow: Being an Account of the Author's Misadventures in Guest-Blogging, with Some Musings on the Genre's Pitfalls and Pathological Forms (and Jonah Lehrer)*

NOV. 28, 2012

Hi, Tom Medvetz here with my final OrgTheory guest post. I thought I'd bring my discussion full circle in this one by returning to the general theme with which I began—namely, "reflexivity"—albeit now with some reflections on the blogging genre itself. As my earlier posts have illustrated, sometimes with painful clarity, I'm no blogger by training. To be honest, I don't even read academic blogs very often. So it was with a certain curiosity that I ventured into this arena over the last couple of months—first, by writing a few entries myself, and second by paying attention to some of the top social science blogs. What did I learn from this? If you're a longtime academic blogger or blog-reader, some of it might seem obvious to you, but hopefully it will also contain a novel twist, like reading an ethnography about your home country.

In the first place, it's clear that the "rules" of academic blogging are different from—and sometimes even apparently at loggerheads with—the rules of scholarship. Part of a blog's appeal, in fact, is that its default style is casual, not formal, and its "temporality" is fast, not slow. If you're a scholar, blogging seems to free you at least momentarily from some of the constraints of academic discourse, and without forcing you to abandon altogether your scholarly authority. As other people have mentioned on this site, blogging can bring certain payoffs that complement the research enterprise nicely. I've come to think of the relationship between these payoffs and academic research in terms of a temporal metaphor:

(1) "Pre-scholarly" dividends

On the one hand, blogging offers certain benefits that I'd call "pre-scholarly" because they're oriented to the goal of generating ideas that can be developed further in research. Here blogging is like "freewriting," a la 3rd grade English class, wherein the point is to "put some thoughts down on paper" and get them flowing without having to worry too much about whether they're actually right or wrong. To say something on a blog, after all, isn't to put it On The Record per se—and in any case it's very easy to go back the next day and strike it from the record. (In fact, you could even argue that this "zig-zag" style of blogging is very efficient for conveying a sense of thoughtfulness while also doubling your output, which is a real issue if you're a blogger. My point being: Who has something worthwhile to say every day? Certainly not I.)

(2) "Post-scholarly" dividends

Conversely, blogs can also be a medium for summarizing or disseminating research results in a very authoritative and definitive style. Writing in a quasi-journalistic mode, an academic blogger can report on the scholarly Events of the Day without having been a part of the action itself. To me, the most interesting thing about this payoff is that it appears to be based on a kind of "meta-objectivity," by which I mean a position of implied distance from the object in which the object is itself a world where authority flows already to those who effectively cultivate a stance of objectivity and distance.

There's no doubt, then, that blogs have a certain seductive appeal to them, especially in their promise to combine these payoffs. And I should emphasize that I don't consider either payoff to be "false." In fact, over the last month I've seen some truly virtuoso examples of academic blogging, both on this site and on some related ones. Overall, then, count me as a cautious fan of academic blogging. However, because I'm both an admirer of Durkheim and a confirmed pessimist, my first impulse whenever I see something seemingly innocuous or good is to go looking for its pathological forms. (Yeah, I know what you're thinking and you're correct: I *am* great at parties.)

You don't have to look very far to find academic blogging's pathological forms. The most obvious would have to be the hubristic style of blogging which, by imagining itself as merging the pre- and post-scholarly stances I just described, also makes a subtle claim to exist in between them—as if being an academic blogger somehow makes you a better scholar. As a blogger, you can post your anecdotal observation-in-need-of-further-investigation one minute and then switch to your Ted Koppel-style Summarizing Voice of Authority the next, the implication being that you also operate quite comfortably in between those bookends. Now I'm sure that an Inveterate Blogger would say that there's no such message built into the act of blogging. Fair enough, I'd say, but this only brings us back to our original question: Why blog? Given the focus of my earlier posts, it should come as no surprise that I see in the "will to blog" something other than a megalomaniacal impulse or a straightforward result of the growth of new media technologies. Instead, I think the popularity of academic blogging has to be understood in relation to other developments in the intellectual field over the last four decades, including the proliferation of "new cultural intermediaries" and intellectual bridging figures, the development of a space of "organized punditry," and the rise of think tanks and "policy experts."

As I mentioned above, there's no question that bloggers can, in their best moments, act as intellectual bridging figures between disparate worlds, such as those of policy, media, and research. But I think embedded in the larger story is a cautionary tale, especially for younger scholars. For instance, if you'd asked me to name the quintessential intellectual bridging figure in America just four months ago, I would have named Jonah Lehrer, the now-discredited neuroscience journalist who went from research assistant in a Nobel prize-winning neuroscientist's lab to a Rhodes Scholarship, and then on to the land of *Wired* magazine and TED talks. Lehrer skipped the part where you actually master "straightforward" scientific research and moved immediately into the role of an intellectual bridging figure.

I find his story very interesting, not just because he's the latest inductee into the Pantheon of Disgraced Journalists already inhabited by people like Jayson Blair and Stephen Glass. More interesting, I think, are the striking continuities between Lehrer's "sins" and the qualities that made him successful in the first place. These continuities in turn reveal the supreme ambiguity of the bridging role he tried to play. The last straw for Lehrer, reputation-wise, was the revelation that he had fabricated quotes in his most recent book.

This was an unambiguous ethical breach by any professional code of conduct, be it scholarly, journalistic, or otherwise. However, to focus only on this last stage of his downfall would be to miss its connection to the previous ones. I'm referring, first, to the intermediate stage in which Lehrer was dogged with the awkward charge of "self-plagiarism," and second, to the earliest critiques of Lehrer, which date roughly to the moment he first stepped into the public eye. Even these critiques, I would argue, contained the seeds of his undoing. In a 2007 review of his first book *Proust Was a Neuroscientist* (published when Lehrer was just 26), Jonathon Keats presciently charged that Lehrer's work was governed by "trivial" choices and "reductionist" tendencies; that it "arbitrarily and often inaccurately illustrat[ed] the sciences with works by artists"; and that it "embodie[d] an approach to the humanities and sciences that threaten[ed] the vitality of both."

Stephen Glass (Hayden Christensen) succumbs to the dark side of the Force, journalistically speaking, in the 2003 movie Shattered Glass.

The common thread across these critiques, in a word, is shortcuts. Jonah Lehrer took too many shortcuts. But how could you avoid taking shortcuts if your public reputation was based on your supposed ability to synthesize and reinterpret work from numerous fields, translate it into an easily digestible style, and engage in rapid, voluminous production—particularly at such a young age? (Lehrer published four books by the age of 30 and wrote columns and/or blog postings for several major outlets, including *Wired*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Boston Globe*, and *The Guardian*.) Despite all the disfavor heaped on him, no one has ever accused Lehrer of being an out-and-out fraud. I find this, along with the fact that much of the offending work was hidden in plain sight for months (or even years) before anyone called him out on it,† to be very telling. Both points speak to a constitutive *ambiguity* in the intellectual bridging role Lehrer was attempting to play. His loss of public legitimacy wasn't sudden, but followed a slow, steady progression from "He's not quite the virtuoso he wants us to believe he is" to the more concrete but still vague, "He recycled his own material, and that's… not right, is it?" to the final, damning, "Dude, he just *made up* that Bob Dylan quote."

In summary, I hope you can see that my view on academic blogging is double-sided and that this is not a critique of the medium itself. As an Inveterate Blogger would point out, any broad slam against blogging would have to rely on sloppy generalizations, fuzzy and impressionistic thinking, and straw men. I'll leave aside the obvious retort—namely, that generalizations, fuzzy thinking, and straw men are precisely what blogs enable you to get away with so easily—and focus instead on the main point, which is that academic blogging's attractions seem to come at the cost of ambiguity: ambiguity about the "rules" of a good blog,

ambiguity about the ultimate goals and payoffs, and ambiguity about the proper relationship between blogging and research. When viewed in this light, the "constraints" of scholarly research begin to look more like forms of freedom to me.

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* The title of this post refers to two "Daniels": Kahneman, whose 2012 book you should definitely check out if you haven't already, and Defoe, whose titles generally had that cool 18th century flair about them and ran roughly the length of a typical blog post.

† And I mean *really* plain sight, as in *New York Times* Bestseller List plain sight.

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