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The digital public sphere, universities and intellectualising the public

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the role of universities in fostering public intellectualism in the rapidly developing digital public sphere. Specifically, the paper asks: Is there a viable role for universities in shaping and encouraging critical reasoning and deliberative dialogue in the digital public sphere? This is a significant question to ask, given the often-dubious quality of public argumentation, confusion over evidential authority and epistemic expertise, alongside the spread of misinformation and bad actors intent on manipulation and disorder. In exploring this question, we position the digital public sphere in the context of democratic practices and debates over the historical role of the public sphere in developing critical reasoning publics. Alongside this, we engage in a discussion of the role of institutions, in particular universities, in mediating and filtering public opinion, making the argument that universities are well positioned to mediate the endless epistemic struggles at play in the digital public sphere. An overview of the digital engagement of Russell Group universities suggests however, that these institutions are currently far removed from such processes of mediation, instead valuing dissemination over deliberation and publicity over publicness.

Introduction

The digital public sphere, comprised of a wide variety of message boards, information outlets, discussion fora and news channels, all enabled via social media and the world wide web, has on paper at least enormous potential to encourage the development of what Habermas referred to as a 'critical reasoning public' (Habermas [1962] 1989). This is a public that, just as in the heyday of the eighteenth century public sphere, can in principle hold nation states to account and speak truth to power – the public sphere effectively acting as a check on undemocratic practices. The potential stems from the flourishing of a technology-enhanced knowledge society in which access to scientific knowledge and academic expertise has never been greater.

The reality, based on recent evidence, is that the public sphere of the twenty-first century is busy squandering this potential, with critical reasoning in short supply and struggling to make itself felt in a world of celebrity gossip and antagonistic behaviour. Online dialogue is a world away from a digital republic of letters and the genesis of a new age of technology-enhanced enlightenment.

Much of the blame for this rests squarely on some of the usual suspects, the rent-seeking behaviour of modern capitalism chief among them (Gillespie 2018). But blame should also lie at the feet of educational institutions, especially universities whose stated aims include the development of

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critical reasoning. Their lack of presence in the digital public sphere is a striking feature of modern intellectual life – instead the digital communicative and deliberative space is dominated by big tech companies and commercially/ideologically driven influencers for which rigorous intellectual debate is low on the list of priorities. This lack of an active engaged presence is a serious oversight given what is at stake: overcoming the distortions of the digital public sphere, the misinformation, profiteering, commodification, as well as the widespread epistemic injustices, depends, as Sevignani puts it (2022, 93) 'on democratic learning processes in publics that foster the flourishing of communicative competences'. Of all the public institutions, universities are uniquely placed to help facilitate these 'democratic learning processes' but have ceded this territory in the informal world of digital communication and opinion formation.

Why such a disconnect between the universities and the public? The political economy underpinning university governance is a key reason behind this disconnect, at least in countries like the UK where the neoliberal shift towards marketisation and consumerism has resulted in these becoming entrenched governing technologies of institutional and academic life (Murphy 2021b). The dominance of once-alien values such as key performance indicators, market share and international league tables have inevitably valorised visible outcomes over intangible processes with an emphasis on monetising strategies holding sway over engagement with (non-paying) publics. Ever-present financial pressures alongside accountability regimes means that democratic ideals tend to become overshadowed by immediate concerns over cost, relevance and prestige.

While these issues are significant, this paper aims instead to examine a more fundamental concern which is the relation between the universities and the public. Specifically, the paper explores the extent to which universities engage with the process of intellectualising the public, or public intellectualism: Is there a viable role for universities in shaping and encouraging critical reasoning and deliberative dialogue in the digital public sphere? To facilitate this exploration, we provide some historical detail on the changing public sphere and its connection to democracy, critical reasoning and deliberation. We then analyse the importance of institutions and especially universities, as sources of mediation for public intellectualism. In order to explore these ideas in practice, we include a small case study of UK universities to gauge the extent of public mediation currently taking place. The paper concludes by detailing some implications of this for the future of critical reasoning in the digital public sphere.

Democracy and the changing public sphere

Habermas' classic text *The structural transformation of the public sphere* ([1962] 1989) made a strong case for the importance of the public sphere as a transformative intellectual space in Western nation states, the book providing an account of the rise of a critical reasoning public in countries such as England in the eighteenth century. Habermas traced the development of this sphere from its original role as a propaganda tool for the state to its conversion into a public debating chamber that often worked against the interests of the political class. Greek in origin, conceptions of the 'public' and the 'private' and of the public sphere were given a new lease of life with the growth of the modern state and of civil society alongside it. As a mediator between society and the state, the public sphere for Habermas is a key element of an effective democracy, offering a privileged space for the 'people's public use of their reason' (*offentliches Rasonnement*) ([1962] 1989, 27).

The privileged space at the time centred on physical spaces such as coffee houses in France, England and Germany, providing a valuable space for public intellectualism to occur in the form of dialogue, debate and argumentation. This burgeoning public sphere became a democratic tool, a crucial site for the 'production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state' (Fraser 1990, 57). This intellectual activity has a number of interrelated functions, arguably most important of which is the development of a critical reasoning public that can keep economic and political interests in check. In this way, democratisation and the public sphere go hand in

hand, as there is a need for 'a constant and lively process of exchange between citizens and the political action and decision-making of the state' (Rosa 2022, 19).

Part of the reason why Habermas was so fascinated by the public sphere was its allowance of participatory and democratic practices that create opportunities for deliberative engagement, i.e. public opinion formation (Habermas [1962] 1989; 2022), public in this sense encompassing the capacity of ordinary citizens to gain access to these opportunities (Habermas [1962] 1989). The understanding of 'public' is therefore related to the idea of openness (*Öffentlichkeit*) both in the sense of unrestricted access to information and debate opportunities as well as in benefitting the 'common good'. By default, the idea of 'public' also contrasts with the notions and practices of private and restricted access.

The concept of the public sphere has spawned a wide range of intellectual debates across the social sciences and humanities, its influence at its heaviest in fields such as sociology, communication and media studies, linguistics, political science and literary studies.[1] Much of the context of these debates has focused on the radical function of the public sphere as a source of public deliberation and political transformation, while also engaging in debates over representation, demography, race, gender and class (Goenaga 2022; Trenz 2023). In particular, the exclusionary nature of the early bourgeois public sphere has been a source of contention (Calhoun 2010), despite it aiming to be a domain of social life key to the formation of public opinion (Habermas 1992). Questions have also been raised about the structure of the public sphere, especially the rigidity of the public sphere concept centred on its singularity, as authors have claimed the existence of a 'plurality of competing counter-publics' (Irving 2014, 67), both during the eighteenth century and since. Della Porta for example has argued that the European space has witnessed 'the development of multiple public spheres' (Della Porta 2022, 53) generated via the activities and interests of various social movements in and against national and trans-national forces.

This plurality and existence of counter and mini publics inevitably add a level of complexity to discourses of democratisation and opinion formation, a complexity that has deepened with the digital transformation of the public sphere. This more recent transformation has attracted considerable attention in the academic field,[2] and rightly so: this century has seen a 'virtual transformation' of the public sphere (Desai 2013) via the proliferation of social media. The digital public sphere has enormous potential as a site of critical reasoning, whose interactive features provide, in theory at least, a gateway for participation in open debates and the democratisation of knowledge (Berners-Lee 2000; 2010). This is possible thanks to the technological advancements of the late twentieth Century, with the inception of the world wide web and what is now called social media. These advancements mark a turning point in how citizens can cultivate knowledge and engage with each other via digital communication tools (Castells 2003; Cardoso 2006). Digital media has in this vein been increasingly disruptive of conventional communicative norms (Christensen and Eyring 2011), changing the way people and institutions interact with both information and their audiences. On paper, this means that information and interactions are open to everyone, regardless of status, gender or race. A digital public sphere is then assumed to operate through a culture of participation and co-production of knowledge with a strong socio-cultural and political discursive element (Shirky 2011).

This digital public sphere is enabled by a wide array of digital platforms – platforms such as Vimeo and YouTube as well as social media sites like X, Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram. Alongside these are numerous knowledge-based platforms such as Quora and Reddit, all sites that have some level of deliberation and interaction at the core of their activities. This new world has opened up enormous possibilities, both for 'new modes of empowerment of the will of the people' (Trenz 2023, 148) as well as post-truth agendas.

The internet has undeniable potential for intellectualisation, potential to be 'a viable site for a public intellectual to articulate a message, particularly a political one' (Iyer 2013, 141). But just as Habermas lamented the consumerism of the public sphere in the twentieth century, the latest incarnation has seen its radical potential clipped by the monetising of content. Social media has shaped

the socio-cultural and political landscape ensuring that economic interests have increasingly dominated the content and parameters of the digital public sphere (Sevignani 2015).

Alongside this, while plurality can be a positive when it comes to social movements and their political impact (Della Porta 2022), there are also significant dangers – Habermas himself has recently commented on the digital-platform inspired 'retreat into shielded echo chambers of the like-minded' which has the effect of conferring on these echo chambers 'the epistemic status of competing public spheres' (Habermas 2023, 45). It is also possible that while such platforms can enable a flourishing of public spheres, it can lead to 'disruption of the public sphere' where increased polarisation can eventually result in extreme forms of separation. In this scenario, separate communities can 'regard radically different ideas as consensus, as part of legitimate debate, and as being beyond legitimate discussion' (Brüggemann and Meyer 2023, 133).

And herein lies the problem: while the public sphere can be a vital mechanism of social learning, providing rich avenues of public pedagogy that can help unlock the radical possibilities of freedom and social justice, this pedagogical potential of the public sphere, the 'process of education and exchange through reading, deliberation and communication' is 'very far from the political reality in the early twenty-first century' (Rosa 2022, 22). This is a key concern as while in contexts such as the EU, citizens care a great deal about the public sphere (Goenaga 2022), it is also the case that 'it has become more difficult for citizens to discriminate reliable from unreliable information' (Goenaga 2022, 249) in a world of endless information actors.

This situation is further complicated by changing concepts of public intellectuals and public intellectualism. Thanks in great part to the rise of the digital public sphere itself, those acting as public intellectuals can avail of a wider array of platforms for dissemination and engagement strategies (Aubin 2013), while there has also been considerable shifts in how the public(s) engages in communicative discourse, illustrating changing dynamics in how intellectual work occurs in public spaces (Jackson and Kreiss 2023), This empirical reality should be taken into account when assessing the veracity of a normative understanding of public intellectualism such as presented here, not least because it offers a strong counter-position against the 'declinist' argument that has been a powerful discourse in debates over public intellectualism (e.g. Jacoby 2000). There is strong evidence to suggest that public intellectualism has transformed itself in recent decades, with the proliferation of new types and sources of public intellectualism (Baert and Shipmann 2013) embedding themselves in contemporary public spheres.

Given that this is the case, what do education researchers have to say about the public sphere? Its presence in education debates is surprisingly minimal, which is an oversight given Habermas' own emphasis on learning spaces and processes as tools of communicative deliberation and political transformation (Habermas 1987). A cursory appreciation of the topic would suggest that the public sphere is fertile ground for a study of educational questions, especially as regards the public framing of these questions, the politics of educational knowledge and the role of social movements in influencing educational outcomes. That said, it would be incorrect to suggest that the relation between education and the public sphere has been overlooked (see Biesta 2014; Giroux 2010; Martin 2011, 2015). Indeed, one can witness the beginnings of an international debate on the topic.[3] Alongside this, there has been a long-standing debate over the university and its publicness more generally (see Marginson 2011).

So where does the university fit into all of this? The rationalities that assist social media use have turned information access and production into valuable commodities that even the academy has found hard to ignore. While higher education has taken some time to adapt to digital trends, social media use has increasingly become a key feature in their marketing and dissemination activities strategy. Nevertheless it remains unexplored how academic institutions, separately from the work of individual academics, can mediate informed publics, especially via the promotion of deliberative practices that are key to the fostering of citizens' informed reasoning

and understanding. What role can universities play as enablers, filters and mediators of public opinion?

Institutions and the public sphere: the importance of mediation

The response to this question very much depends on public opinion itself, its construction and the processes underpinning opinion formation. The public sphere is dependent on an active citizenry who are invested in the outcomes of political and economic decision making and who engage in critical evaluations of the impact of these decisions on justice, welfare, solidarity and community. Public opinion matters in any functioning democracy but public opinion is not just a result of aggregated private opinion, but rather the outcome of what Rosa calls a 'process of argumentative filtering' (Rosa 2022, 21). For this filtering to take place, avenues of mediation need to be available, ones that are accessible and open to members of the public. This requires the 'specific spaces and practices for rehearsal and exercise along with appropriate structures of media for "publicity"' (Rosa 2022, 22).

This is important, as democracies need 'mediation' (Radhakrishnan 2013, 39), but this mediation needs to be from a source that is trusted, reliable and effective. The generating of informed public opinion through filtering and mediation is not just dependent on availability and evidence but also on a relational context that is authoritative and legitimate in the eyes of the public. This is where universities enter the equation, with mediation and filtering acquiring new meanings and possibilities in the digital age. This function has dramatically changed in an age of online news, social media and endless sources of information. The filtering function of traditional news outlets and the journalism profession have ceded into the background, making it much more challenging to evaluate information and arguments on grounds of quality, veracity and rigour. Newspapers no longer hold a monopoly on knowledge filtering, with the public increasingly unable to 'rely on the editorial processes and their compromise-building rules and procedures' (Sevignani 2022, 92).

Universities are well placed to help renew and shape this communicative environment, with vast potential to realise the promise of deliberative forms of democracy. In particular, the institutional power of universities combined with their pedagogical authority and often global reach, makes them arguably a major source of what scholars refer to as 'deliberative systems' (Mansbridge et al. 2012), an approach that emphasises 'interaction between different institutions, organisations and spheres, and the role that their deliberative qualities (such as inclusion, open-mindedness or reason) play in the greater system' (Berg and Lidskog 2018, 4). Modern institutional life lends itself well to interconnections across governance and administrative systems, while the academic profession is highly networked, professionalised and well versed in narratives of public engagement and social impact. In theory at least, universities' in-built institutional power is fertile ground for embedding 'deliberative capacity' in the mediation of the digital public sphere (Dryzek 2009; Felicetti, Niemeyer, and Curato 2016).

That said, the university has been strangely absent from much of the discussion regarding the public sphere (Holmwood 2017). It also has a chequered history when it comes to practical involvement in public sphere activities, a history that speaks to the broader history of the university and society. There was a period, during the expansion of public higher education, where universities in the UK were an important part of what Holmwood (932) calls the 'citizenship complex', a key component of democracy that could compete with business and bureaucracy as a source of power and authority. But the dismantling of this complex in the age of neoliberalism has seen a retreat from public engagement of this type, from a form of 'thick' to 'thin' citizenship, which according to Holmwood (2017, 935) 'will involve the return of problems that thick citizenship sought to resolve'.

These problems include issues of citizenship engagement, public reasoning and inclusive and participatory democracies, issues that the university has disengaged from alongside the retreat to negative freedom in the shape of institutional autonomy (Murphy 2022). That said, the university

needs to be assessed in the context of debates over professional and expert knowledges and their relation to public opinion formation, debates that have a long lineage.[4]

It would be remiss, however, not to engage with a different argument that has become much more prevalent in recent decades regarding the epistemic value of the university. Thinkers such as Lyotard (1984) developed extensive critiques of the enlightenment ideal of the university, one in which the institution legitimated itself as the 'higher' source of epistemic authority. In the 'post-modern' world such forms of legitimation no longer carry any real weight, instead the university cedes territory in the face of technological advances, societal transformations, processes of commodification and the development of diverse sites of knowledge production and dissemination (Murphy 2021a, 170). Combined, these analyses ask questions of the university and its potential as an 'influencer' in the modern digital public sphere.

While this is true, it does not provide a convincing rationale for abandoning greater connections between the university and the public sphere. The argument presented here does not assume that the university holds an elite privileged position, or that it *should* do based on historical precedent. Postmodern critiques should not blind us to the potential that can be harnessed in future democratic practices – if anything, these critiques have strengthened the case for the university in the public sphere. Arguments over knowledge monopolies, for example, are arguably more relevant in a culture in which monetisation and commodification have strengthened their grip on knowledge transfer, communication and dissemination. It is also the case that the questioning of university authority has produced a much stronger awareness of the politics of knowledge production, alongside a clearer conception that political power is heavily invested in struggles over epistemic authority.[5] Both of these aspects invest the university with greater potential for enabling democratic futures rather than detract from it.

In this way, contemporary transformations position the university as an important player in struggles over knowledge. And rather than being positioned above and beyond the public sphere, we take the position, like Delanty (1998), that the university is well situated to mediate these epistemic struggles as a vital element of the public sphere in its own right. As Delanty puts it, universities 'must recapture a sense of public commitment' (1998, 22), by 'mediating intellectual, expert and public cultures rather than declaring the superiority of one over the other'.

Also, whether universities like it or not, education is embedded in public sphere discourse – there is strong evidence to suggest that the mediating function of the public sphere itself can have significant consequences for the education sector. This is something noted when it comes to mass media pre-the social media age, for example on the discursive practices of schooling shaped by newspaper editorial policy.[6] This function is also evident in relation to the higher education sector, as political and economic forces compete for discursive control over university curricula. The public sphere is the site of continual attacks on academic freedom, degree provision and institutional autonomy, attacks that are driven by specific sets of interests and ideologies that in some cases are openly hostile to the intellectual rigour and freedom provided by university life (Redstone and Villasenor 2020). In this context, academic arguments over whether or not universities *should* engage more in the public sphere become less important with the realisation that universities are *already* very much ensconced in the communicative lifeworld of the public sphere.

How *do* universities engage with the public?

In order to gain a stronger understanding of the relation between universities and the digital public sphere, the authors conducted a small case study of institutions in the United Kingdom. We chose to focus on the 24 UK leading universities' – also known as Russell Group – websites, including their social media presence, community features, impact engagement, news and events sections as areas targeted at a wider public. The 24 UK leading universities were identified for the purpose of this research because they are 'committed to maintaining the very best research, an outstanding teaching and learning experience and unrivalled links with business and the public sector'

(Russell Group website) and believe that 'people and ideas are the key to meeting global challenges' (Russell Group website).

The focus in this case study is on not just 'official' channels but institutionally-badged and institutionally-driven formal communications/engagements with the public, rather than informal, ad-hoc and/or academic driven engagements. Universities are of course comprised of numerous academics who engage with the public in various ways through their own websites, podcasts and blogs. There are also any number of teaching and research centres that generate these types of activities on an irregular basis, with more or less official support depending on status and institution. These activities, as useful as they are, are quite distinct from institutionally-driven public sphere engagements that formally represent the university and that comprise core elements of institutional engagement strategy and policy. We are focused on the institutional power invested in universities and what that could potentially bring to deliberation and critical reasoning in the public sphere.

Steps taken for content analysis are detailed below:

- The Russell Group institutions became the focus of this research because at least on paper they are regarded as the most prestigious universities in the country, primarily due to their research capacity, and lauded as knowledge powerhouses. The 24 UK leading Universities are represented anonymously in the Appendix.
- A checklist has been prepared after a first phase of analysis of the websites regarding the key main communicative features each institution makes available online to the public. Five (5) units of analysis have been identified: (1) social media presence, (2) community features, (3) impact engagement, (4) news and (5) events to examine the content of each university website under research (see Appendix)
- The checklist was revised by the researchers who individually and collaboratively added information to it upon examination of all universities' websites featured in the study. This process went through different iterations, with two researchers revising the accuracy the data. This whole process was completed in September 2024, after which any changes to the websites stopped being accounted for in this paper.

This analysis of the RG university websites indicates that digital mechanisms of public intellectualism are hard to identify and in the majority of the cases are missing from universities' institutional online presence where the divulgation of information takes precedence over discursive forms of engagement. Of particular emphasis is the absence of dialogic activities for the development of deliberative practices with a wider public. This means that the digital communication mechanisms employed by RG universities are mostly unilateral, with institutions' online presence serving as a window to promote their achievements and advertise their business, i.e. teaching, research and consultancy capacity.

The universities' websites explored in this study are mere mirrors of their own knowledge production. There is little evidence of the cultivation of knowledge or discursive relations with an extended audience. Instead, the websites mostly function as an exhibition of work. Below, we detail these observations further via two distinctive categories regarding the contents of universities' online publications and digital presence: publicness vs publicity; and dissemination vs deliberation.

Publicness vs publicity

UK universities have adhered to open access policies – as a reflection of REF imperatives – and where possible publish and make available the research produced by their staff in open formats. Aided by the idea that the accessibility of research knowledge can also flow through such digital media networks for easy access, universities have invested in boosting their online presence through sophisticated websites and social media platforms. This provides a public facing view of the institution and

gives the impression of accessibility to wider audiences. Yet, this accessibility is to a great extent constricted to the narratives the institution wishes to impart and not to those that can be co-produced in dialogue.

From the website analysis, institutional websites feature News, Events and Research Impact pages that at first sight appear to serve the public. These pages offer positive messages on the research accomplishments of the institution. These are curated narratives that aim to point out institutional achievements as a form of capturing prestige and the public imagination associated with it. These sections of institutional online presence rarely provide space for active engagement with the public – see Appendix, under 'News' in which each university has a news section identified as 'without possibility of public comments'. This is even further noted in the promotion of online events that are usually targeted at the transmission of work produced by the university and which once recorded become static digital content for the public to watch. The public is positioned as receptor as opposed to being positioned as part of a dialogic relation.

Digital access as a form of public engagement is leveraged by universities as a facilitator and enabler of information consumption; a straightforward way of connecting to an audience through the distribution of content. This form of connection is mostly one-way, one that does not have as its key mission the promotion of participatory practices. This provides a distinction between what theoretically is deemed public and what in practice becomes publicity, i.e. promotional activity. UK Universities' websites and the content they display are dedicated to advertising the results of their activities. The axis of these activities rotates around the idea of research excellence that then feeds into both their teaching provision and impact agendas. The information displayed is thus suited to informing their enterprises – appealing both to a student market and research funders' imperatives and stipulations – and not to the engagement of and/or with a wider public in discussions of current affairs.

In this way, the digital presence of universities fits with a rationale of performativity, influenced by a market logic and aligned to the interests of a specialised audience. The digital openness or accessibility of the university is limited to the baseline interests of the university which are both commercial (through the recruitment of potential students) and prestige driven (by affirming its reputation in certain areas of knowledge production).

This leads us to the next theme that discusses the differences between dissemination of information and deliberation of ideas as essential to the formation of informed opinions.

Dissemination vs deliberation

Dissemination of reliable information is a key pillar of democratic practices, something that is becoming increasingly hard to distinguish in the midst of the mis-information practices that surface online. Universities, as bastions of academic knowledge, have a role to fill in this regard. To a certain extent this is done through the information mechanisms that universities have in place, be it via the different website sections informing the public of their knowledge activities or through their social media presence. That said, this is just one of the elements that comprise public sphere activity and which cannot fully deliver to the imperatives of communication and deliberative action without the possibility of participation. It is here that universities' digital presence falls short of contributing to an engaged public sphere in that their digital presence is more invested in the distribution of information than it is the animation of public communication. In other words, whereas universities have invested heavily in their online presence this is mostly manifested through a representation of what their staff do, with less opportunity to engage and facilitate broader discussions over current events and national priorities.

This in itself goes against the essence of a digital culture that is participatory in nature. Participation in deliberative practices is the other binding element of the public sphere alongside access to information. Universities' communication systems are often organised as one-way channels in that they do not tend to invite conversation. This is also the case for the way in which information

is disseminated – the default setting of 'reporting' what has been done does not encourage debate about the ideas published. This is evident in how institutions communicate their research impact online (see Appendix) with most of the 24 universities devoting a webpage to 'the impact the institution makes via research case studies', in nearly all cases adopting a straightforward 'reporting style'. Rarely do the 24 universities deviate from this path; university '13' in our study has a more elaborate impact webpage that details the 'impact the institution makes via research case studies, emphasising the link of research in informing policy and practices'. It also details the input of the institution on the adoption of changes. But this is only a deviation from the norm which emphasises dissemination over deliberation. This approach to dissemination of information as a form of public service precludes citizens from engaging more thoroughly with the works of the university and pushes them to find in other digital discursive spaces the type of engagement that digital technologies, especially of a social media kind, can enable.

This apparent detachment of universities' communicative channels from the public's digital practices is a concern, especially given the damaging impact of people's engagement with misinformation that threaten the fabric of democratic life. Here one must question the role of universities in current debates, for example on topics such as migration, the economy, welfare, diversity, nationalism, to name a few – all key areas of research – that are easily distorted by ideological echo chambers in which people are increasingly invested.

In short, universities have developed professional looking web presences that can attest to their knowledge work. This presence aims to represent the capacities they have built. This is done through carefully crafted messages that aim to deliver to the expectations of national and government entities and the desires of potential student cohorts, both of which become key funders of academia's activity given the reliance of the UK HE sector on external funds. While this delivers to a strategic agenda of reputational value, it does not acquire the same level of currency in a digital context. The emphasis placed on presentation via their information dissemination strategies overlooks the important role they can also assume as mediators of deliberation. Transmission of information, not communication, is the guiding rationale that underpins the web presence of UK universities.

Discussion

This brief analysis of university online presence reveals some interesting elements of university engagement in the digital public sphere. Not surprisingly in such a performative age, considerable effort is expended on creating a polished version of academic research capacity, expertise and contribution to key areas of development. This evidence is presented to the public via dissemination events and sleek webpages with related information. Space for the enhancement of opinion mediation and formation however is absent from this curated digital presence, thereby precluding any concerted effort to foster discursive relations between academia and the general public. In line with the general trends of competition and marketisation, these websites resemble more a promotional and advertorial space where information communicates institutional prestige. Those members of the public who seek out academic expertise and insight tend to be provided with static information; little if any intellectual space is created to make room for actual public engagement with public opinion – spaces for deliberation and for dialogic learning with non-university persons are striking in their absence.

This lack of a mediating function is an oversight on the part of institutions and their understanding of impactful work. It is a critical omission and once the question is asked, the absence of a robust, active and committed university presence in the modern public sphere can be viewed as at best an opportunity missed, and at worst, an abdication of responsibility on the part of publicly-funded institutions. This begs a second question: why is this the case? Any response emanating from the UK would need to include the effects of overwrought demands for relevance, value for money agendas and highly-restricted conceptions of societal impact (Murphy 2021b). Universities have

also been blindsided by the transformation in the 'game' of knowledge dissemination, communication and public opinion formation. The temporal nature of online communication combined with the 'wild west' style of digital knowledge production and dissemination, means that the current system of expertise struggles to compete with the noise of politicised and monetised claims to trust, legitimacy and authority.

Twentieth century post-modern arguments about knowledge monopolisation alluded to earlier come across as out-dated in a digital public sphere where academic knowledge and institutional power hold little influence. This is where Holmwood's thin citizenship complex is very much in evidence, a space in which bureaucratic demands for headline impact have stifled direct academic engagement with public deliberation, while the social media companies and digital technology firms become the new knowledge monopolisers. In this context, strategies of publicity and dissemination offer weak bulwarks against a growing tide of irrelevance.

On a more prosaic note, while having a global reach, institutions such as Russell Group universities may also have sets of local connections with different public groups depending on discipline, locale and institution. This is valuable work but tends to be piecemeal and lack wider intellectual traction. Of more immediate concern is the formidable roadblocks that tend to stymy even the thought of 'thick citizenship' as Holmwood called it. There are major pressures brought to bear on the structure and organisation of British universities, which help go some way to explaining the over-reliance on publicity and dissemination as tools of engagement in the public sphere. Chief among these are funding struggles related to increased tuition fees and diminished research funds (Shattock and Horvath 2020). Also of relevance is the national REF exercise in the UK that establishes the level of research funding institutions received based on their evaluated research capacity (Murphy 2022).

These should be considered major mitigating factors impacting the ability of universities to intellectualise the public. The plurality of public spheres mentioned earlier should also be considered an important factor; that said, plurality does not provide a strong enough rationale for institutional disengagement from forms of public pedagogy; if anything it can help strengthen the case for cross-public institutions that embody public and intellectual authority while being beholden to no-one specific public sphere.

An arguably more significant mitigating factor relates to the factual nature of the 'public sphere': Della Porta is right to claim that the 'idea of a public sphere has always been fictitious' (2022, 53) – i.e. that it remains an ideal as opposed to a hard-cased institutionalised form of association. In this regard, it shares common ground with Anderson's 'imagined community' of nationhood (Anderson 1991), entities that develop on soft foundations that are wide open to flux and transformation. But just as with nationhood and national forms of identity, the mutable public sphere exerts significant influence over publicness and public opinion, and its soft and undefined character should not act as a deterrent to establishing processes of public intellectualism.

At the same time, no-one should be under any illusion that the social media world can and does provide sympathetic and conducive spaces for public deliberation. It is arguably the case that social media platforms are 'hostile toward those types of engagements and make authentic dialogue much more difficult than it ought to be' (Anderson and Keehn 2019, 146). While digital communication can arguably make the process of idea exchange much quicker, easier and accessible to a wider range of people simultaneously, it has also helped encourage a culture of demagoguery and authoritarianism.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the role of universities in fostering public intellectualism with a particular focus on the question: Is there a viable role for universities in shaping and encouraging critical reasoning and deliberative dialogue in the digital public sphere? The paper provided some historical context for this work and emphasised the importance of institutional filters as mediators of critical

reasoning and informed public opinion. Using the example of Russell Group universities in the UK, the study found that, when it comes to engaging in the digital public sphere, universities tend towards marketized forms of communication, with efforts oriented towards publicity and dissemination, with less activity dedicated to what we can call publicness and deliberation.

This finding raises significant questions about the nature of public intellectualism and academia's place in it. Universities rely heavily on the intellectual labour of their staff while also making considerable investments in their social media presence as key to their engagement work as supposedly public-facing institutions. In the not-so-distant past, the role of the academic as public intellectual was facilitated, by default or by design, by institutional cultures that adopted a tolerant attitude to public engagement while also arguably benefiting from the publicity/attention/media scrum (Murphy and Costa 2019). In the twenty-first century the context has changed dramatically which requires a re-evaluation of the relation between universities and public intellectualism as well as the devolved nature of public intellectual work – institutions cannot continue to rely on what is often characterised as a declining public intellectual culture among academics (Etzioni and Bodwitch 2006; Jacoby 2022).

This context, of declining public intellectualism, is often lamented by academic and media commentators, but often overlooked is the more general plight of intellectualism, of critical reasoning, deliberation and argumentation in a world in evident need of more intellectualism not less. The advancing dangers of anti-intellectualism is less a symptom than a significant cause of post-truth agendas alongside the retreat to irrationality and pseudo-science. The rational, pedagogical and critical potential of the original public sphere was 'killed off' in the twentieth century, with lots of 'different fingerprints on the murder weapon' (Jeffries 2016, 355), including the demise of the welfare state and the rise of mass media. When judgement is cast on the unfulfilled potential of the twenty-first century digital public sphere, the university may end up cast as a not-so-innocent bystander in the retreat from public reason.

While this paper has identified a concern over public intellectualism and detailed a glaring lack of 'publicness', this does not negate the potential of public intellectualism nor does it undermine any future possibilities of university engagement in the public sphere. Institutional interventions on communication flows and public opinion formation do occur, and can work.[7] It is also the case that the digital public sphere can be a source and generator of deliberative politics, critical reasoning and mediation (Sampredo and Martínez Avidad 2018). In principle, there is nothing stopping universities creating digital spaces of deliberation where discursive engagement can occur. It is hoped that the argument put forth in this paper can at least ask the question: well, why not?

Notes

1. For useful overviews and introductions to the topic, see Gripsrud et al. (2010) *The Idea of the Public Sphere: A Reader* and Calhoun's edited collection (1992) *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. The radicalism of the public sphere as well as its class-based nature is explored in some detail in both Kluge and Negt's (2016) *Public Sphere and Experience: Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* and Calhoun (2012) *The Roots of Radicalism: Tradition, the Public Sphere, and Early Nineteenth-Century Social Movements*.
2. See the special issue 'Reconceptualizing public sphere(s) in the digital age? On the role and future of public sphere theory', Published in Communication Theory, Volume 33, Issue 2-3, May-August 2023, Guest Editors: Mark Eisenegger and Mike S. Schäfer https://academic.oup.com/ct/issue/33/2-3. And also 'A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere?' published in Theory, Culture & Society, Volume 39 Issue 4, July 2022, guest edited by Martin Seeliger and Sebastian Sevignani https://journals.sagepub.com/toc/tcsa/39/4.
3. For example, see the importance of the public sphere for social movement learning in India (Patil 2023), the role of public sphere education for democracy in Japan (Ueno 2015), the significance of public education in the Indonesian public sphere (Sujoko, Rahmiati, and Rahman 2023), the intersection of gender, education and the public sphere in Saudi Arabia (Almansour and Kempner (2016) and the impact on digital culture in Brazil (Gomes 2015).
4. See for example, the Lippmann-Dewey debate of the 1920s (Feinstein 2015). This was a debate in which Dewey argued the case for an educationally-generated public opinion that could engage effectively with expert cultures, an ideal type view in opposition to Lippman's more elitist view of scientific expertise. Dewey was duty bound to take this stance given the significance he attached to education for democratic ends. As he put it,

democracy 'demands a more thoroughgoing education than the education of officials, administrators, and directors of industry' (Dewey 1922; 288. Cited in Feinstein 2015, 159).

5. See as an example of often Foucault-inspired literature on power, knowledge and the university, Morrissey (2013).
6. See Thomas's work on Australian curriculum policy (Thomas 2002), in particular, her argument about how public discourses 'worked to construct authoritative voices on educational policy' (Thomas 2002, 187). In this case it was the way in which the sports lobby were able to control the narrative around physical education in schools and 'resulted in the marginalisation of teachers in struggles over policy in the public sphere' (Thomas 2002, 197).
7. A useful example of this is provided by Bjola and Papadakis (2020) on the 'Finnish Approach to Building Digital Resilience'. Closer to home, see also Meredith's (2021) work on academic engagement via conference work.

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Appendix. UK Elite Universities – Russell Group websites

University code	Community	News	Impact agendas	Events	Social Media presence (mainly serves the purpose of advertising the universities and shares updates about the institutions' activities)
1.	The community engagement focused on partnerships with different organisations and business. There are also sections dedicated to methods of co-production associated with public engagement.	News pieces featuring the university and academic activity and achievements. Section without possibility of public comments.	Webpage on the impact the institution makes via research case studies, especially in policy. It adopts a reporting style.	Events section promotes lectures, talks and workshops, performances, seminars and symposia, mostly on campus.	Instagram ✓ Flickr ✓ X ✓ Facebook ✓ TikTok ✓ Youtube ✓ SoundCloud ✓
2.	Narratives of public engagement no longer updated. Public engagement framed as engaging with schools for recruitment of students, or working with citizens on research projects.	News pieces featuring the university and academic activity and achievements. Section without possibility of public comments.	Webpage on the impact the institution makes via research. It adopts a reporting style.	Events section promotes lectures, talks and workshops, mostly on campus. It also promotes art events.	LinkedIn ✓ X ✓ Facebook ✓ Youtube ✓
3.	Community engagement section shares its mission as: to communicate expert knowledge and different types of content to enlighten and stimulate the public [text altered to avoid traceability].	News pieces featuring the university and academic activity and achievements. Section without possibility of public comments.	Section dedicated to impact features synopses of research projects categorised by type of impact (societal, Economic, health, technological, etc.).	Events section promotes a comprehensive list of activities: public lectures, talks, exhibitions, festivals, museum events, etc. that happen on campus.	Instagram ✓ LinkedIn ✓ X ✓ Facebook ✓ TikTok ✓ Youtube ✓
4.	It features a community partnership scheme to connect researchers with third sector organisations. Enables others to get in touch with the university for the purpose of research collaboration.	News pieces featuring the university and academic activity and achievements. Section without possibility of public comments.	Webpage on the impact the institution makes via research. It adopts a reporting style.	Events section promotes lectures, talks and workshops, seminars and symposia, mostly on campus.	Instagram ✓ LinkedIn ✓ X ✓ Facebook ✓ Weibo ✓ WeChat ✓ Youtube ✓ TikTok ✓ Threads ✓ Rednote ✓
5.	Community engagement section inexistent. There is a section focused on global engagement featuring academics' research across the different continents.	News pieces featuring the university and academic activity and achievements. Section without possibility of public comments.	Webpage on the impact the institution makes via research. It adopts a reporting style.	Events section is hard to find. It mostly promotes exhibitions and events through the museums it is associated with.	Instagram ✓ LinkedIn ✓ X ✓ Facebook ✓ Youtube ✓
6.	Community engagement section shares its mission as: Supporting staff in public engagement activities to spread their ideas, encourage new practices and perspectives and stimulate discussions with new publics. [text	News pieces featuring the university and academic activity and achievements. Section without possibility of public comments.	Webpage on the impact the institution makes via research. It adopts a reporting style.	Events section promotes lectures, talks and workshops, mostly on campus. It also promotes art and festival events.	Instagram ✓ LinkedIn ✓ X ✓ Facebook ✓ Youtube ✓

Continued.

University code	Community	News	Impact agendas	Events	Social Media presence (mainly serves the purpose of advertising the universities and shares updates about the institutions' activities)
	altered to avoid traceability]. However, there is no evidence of such interactive activities of the website.				
7.	The community engagement section shares its mission: to help staff to engage with the world … to share expertise in novel and collective ways [text altered to avoid traceability]. This is achieved through activities that bring the university to the outside world through events, resources, collaborative work and co-production methods.	News pieces featuring the university and academic activity and achievements. Section without possibility of public comments.	Webpage on the impact the institution makes via research case studies, especially in policy. It adopts a reporting style.	Events section promotes lectures, masterclasses, and workshops, mostly on campus.	Instagram ✓ Flickr ✓ X ✓ Facebook ✓ Youtube ✓
8.	Community engagement is mainly done through student-led clinics. Reports on community projects and events.	News pieces featuring the university and academic activity and achievements. Section without possibility of public comments.	Webpage on the impact the institution makes via research. It adopts a reporting style.	Events section promotes lectures, talks and workshops, seminars and symposia, mostly on campus. It also promotes interactive workshops and events for families via the museums it is associated with.	Instagram ✓ X ✓ Facebook ✓ ✓ Youtube ✓
9.	It does not have a community page per se. Different departments have a public engagement sections, mainly focused on how the public can be connected to research activity via participatory methods, such as interactive workshops.	News pieces featuring the university and academic activity and achievements. Section without possibility of public comments.	Webpage on the impact the institution makes via research case studies. It adopts a reporting style.	Events section promotes lectures, talks and workshops, seminars and symposia, mostly on campus.	X ✓ LinkedIn ✓ Youtube ✓
10.	The community engagement section shares its mission: to foment a culture of research engagement via training, capturing of research impact. [text altered to avoid traceability]. However, there is no evidence of such interactive activities of the website.	News pieces featuring the university and academic activity and achievements. Section without possibility of public comments.	Webpage on the impact the institution makes via research case studies. It adopts a reporting style.	Events section promotes lectures, talks and workshops, seminars and symposia, mostly on campus.	Instagram ✓ LinkedIn ✓ X ✓ Facebook ✓ Youtube ✓
11.	It does not have a community page per se. Different departments have a public engagement section, mainly focused on how the public can be connected to research activity via participatory methods, such as interactive workshops, and online courses.	News pieces featuring the university and academic activity and achievements. Section without possibility of public comments.	Webpage on the impact the institution makes via research case studies. It adopts a reporting style.	Events section promotes lectures, talks and workshops, seminars and symposia, mostly on campus.	Instagram ✓ LinkedIn ✓ X ✓ Facebook ✓ Youtube ✓ Weibo ✓
12.	The community engagement section shares its mission: to share the research activity and its outcomes with the public [text altered to avoid traceability]. This is achieved through events created for the public, with online content available to some of them.	News pieces featuring the university and academic activity and achievements. Section without possibility of public comments.	Webpage on the impact the institution makes via research case studies, especially in policy. It adopts a reporting style.	Events section promotes lectures, performances, and workshops, seminars and symposia, mostly on campus.	Instagram ✓ LinkedIn ✓ X ✓ Facebook ✓ Youtube ✓

Continued.

University code	Community	News	Impact agendas	Events	Social Media presence (mainly serves the purpose of advertising the universities and shares updates about the institutions' activities)
13.	It features a series of blogs, open to public commentary, as well as other media that employ expert input from academic staff to address current affairs.	News pieces featuring the university and academic activity and achievements. Section without possibility of public comments.	Webpage on the impact the institution makes via research case studies, emphasising the link of research in informing policy and practices. It details the input of the institution on the adoption of changes.	Events section promotes lectures, talks and workshops, seminars and symposia, many events are hybrid.	Instagram ✓ LinkedIn ✓ X ✓ Facebook ✓ SoundCloud ✓ Youtube ✓ Flickr ✓
14.	It does not have a community page per se. Different departments have a public engagement section, mainly focused on sharing research knowledge and developing co-production research activities.	News pieces featuring the university and academic activity and achievements. Section without possibility of public comments.	Webpage on the impact the institution makes via research case studies, especially in policy. It adopts a reporting style.	Events section promotes open talks, masterclasses, workshops, and MOOCs.	Instagram ✓ Flickr ✓ X ✓ Facebook ✓ Youtube ✓
15.	Community engagement is focused on students. Different departments have a public engagement section, mainly focused on how the public can be connected to research activity or how they conduct participatory research. Reports of business engagement	News pieces featuring the university and academic activity and achievements. Section without possibility of public comments. It has an inactive Newsblog.	Webpage on the impact the institution makes via research case studies, especially in policy. It adopts a reporting style.	Events section promotes lectures, talks and workshops, seminars and symposia, mostly on campus.	Instagram ✓ LinkedIn ✓ X ✓ Facebook ✓ Youtube ✓ TikTok ✓
16.	The community engagement section shares its mission: to make a difference and affect people's lives through co-production methods [text altered to avoid traceability]. However, there is no evidence of interactive activities of the website. These seem to allude to participatory research methods.	News pieces featuring the university and academic activity and achievements. Section without possibility of public comments.	Webpage on the impact the institution makes via research case studies, especially in policy. It adopts a reporting style.	Events section promotes lectures, talks and workshops, seminars and symposia, mostly on campus. It also promotes interactive workshops and events for families via the museums it is associated with.	Instagram ✓ LinkedIn ✓ X ✓ Facebook ✓ Weibo ✓ Youtube ✓ TikTok ✓ Medium ✓ Apple Podcast ✓
17.	The community engagement section shares its mission: to share and influence research with the public as collaborators [text altered to avoid traceability]. However, there is no evidence of interactive activities of the website. These seem to allude to participatory research methods.	News pieces featuring the university and academic activity and achievements. Section without possibility of public comments.	Webpage on the impact the institution makes via research case studies, especially in policy. It adopts a reporting style.	Events section promotes lectures, talks and workshops, seminars and symposia, mostly on campus.	Instagram ✓ LinkedIn ✓ X ✓ Facebook ✓ Youtube ✓ TikTok ✓
18.	The community engagement section shares its mission: to share knowledge, teaching and principles with the public and political audiences [text altered to avoid traceability]. However, there is no evidence of interactive activities of the website. These seem to be linked to volunteering schemes, engagement with business and research collaboration with the third sector.	News pieces featuring the university and academic activity and achievements. Section without possibility of public comments.	Webpage on the impact the institution makes via research case studies, especially in policy. It adopts a reporting style.	Events section promotes lectures, talks and workshops, seminars and symposia, mostly on campus.	Instagram ✓ X ✓ Facebook ✓ Youtube ✓

Continued.

University code	Community	News	Impact agendas	Events	Social Media presence (mainly serves the purpose of advertising the universities and shares updates about the institutions' activities)
19.	Public and community engagement is mainly done through showcase events.	News pieces featuring the university and academic activity and achievements. Section without possibility of public comments.	Webpage on the impact the institution makes via research case studies, especially in policy. It adopts a reporting style.	Events section promotes lectures, talks and workshops, performances, seminars and symposia, mostly on campus.	Instagram ✓ LinkedIn ✓ X ✓ Facebook ✓ Weibo ✓ WeChat ✓ Youtube ✓ TikTok ✓
20.	It does not have a community page per se. Different departments have a public engagement section, mainly focused on how the public can be connected to research activity via talks and outreach activities, as well as media engagement.	News pieces featuring the university and academic activity and achievements. Section without possibility of public comments.	Webpage on the impact the institution makes via research case studies, especially in policy. It adopts a reporting style.	Events section promotes lectures, talks and workshops, seminars and symposia, mostly on campus.	Instagram ✓ LinkedIn ✓ X ✓ Facebook ✓ Weibo ✓ WeChat ✓ Youtube ✓ SnapChat ✓
21.	The website features a Partnership area [wording changed to avoid identification] focused on how the industry can partner with the university. There is a public engagement strategy which is Ref-driven. Does not provide examples of public discourse	News pieces featuring the university and academic activity and achievements. Section without possibility of public comments.	Webpage on the impact the institution makes via research or other activities does not seem to be available.	Events section promotes lectures, talks and workshops, mostly on campus. It also promotes live music events.	Instagram ✓ LinkedIn ✓ X ✓ Facebook ✓ Weibo ✓ WeChat ✓ Youtube ✓
22.	The community engagement section shares its mission: exploring how to communicate ideas and expertise, encourage discussion and involve the public in the HEI's work [text altered to avoid traceability]. However, there is no evidence of interactive activities of the website. These seem to allude to participatory research methods.	News pieces featuring the university and academic activity and achievements. Section without possibility of public comments.	Webpage on the impact the institution makes via research case studies, especially in policy. It adopts a reporting style.	Events section promotes lectures, talks and workshops, seminars and symposia, mostly on campus. It also promotes interactive workshops and events for families via the museums it is associated with.	Instagram ✓ LinkedIn ✓ X ✓ Facebook ✓ Youtube ✓ TikTok ✓
23.	It does not have a community page per se. Different departments have a public engagement section, mainly focused on how the public can be connected to research activity via talks and outreach activities.	News pieces featuring the university and academic activity and achievements. Section without possibility of public comments.	Webpage on the impact the institution makes via research case studies, especially in policy. It adopts a reporting style.	Events section promotes lectures, talks and workshops, seminars and symposia, mostly on campus.	Instagram ✓ LinkedIn ✓ X ✓ Facebook ✓ Youtube ✓
24.	Community engagement section shares its mission as: to use the institution's expert knowledge to deliver impact to communities via research projects [text altered to avoid traceability]	News pieces featuring the university and academic activity and achievements. Section without possibility of public comments.	Webpage on the impact the institution makes via research. It adopts a reporting style.	Events section promotes lectures, talks and demonstrations, mostly on campus.	Instagram ✓ LinkedIn ✓ X ✓ Facebook ✓ Youtube ✓