

Book Review

Where Ideas go to Die: The Fate of Intellect in American Journalism. Michael McDevitt.
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Large swaths of U.S. society have long been opposed to notions of “intellectualism,” and they have turned to media, including journalism, film, and literature, to reinforce skepticism, fear, and narrow, normative ideologies about social conditions and issues of everyday life that “anti-intellectualism” provides. Washington Irving’s fictional Ichabod Crane of “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” for example, is a wiry intellect, bullied against winning the hand of a fair maiden by Abraham Van Brunt, a bolstering brute. While Crane represents the dangers of showing smarts and being of old school Europeanism, Van Brunt is the epitome of newfound American power in the early 1800s through independence and physical (and military) strength. Even if Van Brunt is a “bad guy,” at least he’s not a nerd, the story goes, and is much more likely to win the girl. Such representations of power have been adopted by Disney and other popular media companies with anti-intellectual meanings continually embedded in their products, reproduced also in news through visuals and explanations of, among other things, U.S. police and military might, masculine and aggressive representations of the power of Wall Street and capitalism, and the marginalization of public intellectuals as merely muddying waters and splitting hairs.

This pause before discussing *Where Ideas go to Die: The Fate of Intellect in American Journalism*, by Michael McDevitt, a former journalist and now a professor of journalism and media studies at University of Colorado Boulder, highlights the long-standing strength of subscriptions to anti-intellectualism, even among media literate and politically and civically engaged citizens. Intellectualism, or merely “thinking too much about things,” these people believe, doesn’t put food on the table, contributing to pushback by voters (not only in the time of Trump) to university education as well as to an overarching support of political discourse in favor of institutional indoctrination about free market and the promise of individual prosperity. This commitment to institutional thinking, McDevitt argues, has implicated journalism—and its role in social control of thought—in enabling the growing foundation of populism in today’s political and social spheres. [N]ewswork, McDevitt writes, “is at once passive and deferential, dismissive, impatient, suspicious, and exploitive in the way it engages intellect” (p. 167). It is these simultaneous positions, he writes, that fuel political

and social fragmentation, the hyper-capitalistic economy of the news industry, the interjection of news philanthropy, and synergistically aligned institutions of journalistic education.

In short, and in the first page of the book, McDevitt presents his premise that “the social control of intellect *by* journalism is accompanied by social control *of* journalism and in classrooms where norms are cultivated” (p. 1, italics in original). Such processes of delegitimization of intellect in and through journalism, which give rise to a society largely more intrigued by anti-intellectual populism than by any form of popular intellectual thought, begins with journalists’ general skepticism of “intellectuals” and entails simplifying intellectual interpretations of everyday life and social policy and public sentiment. (It is a balance many of us former-journalists easily remember when we had to interview, with an eye-roll, an “intellectual expert” on some story where their “larger-story” perspective didn’t seem necessary but was yet required as part of the job.)

The first section of McDevitt’s book focuses on establishing a foundational awareness of anti-intellectualism in dominant U.S. society and the negotiations surrounding it in reporting. The book’s second section is far more interesting. In Chapter 5, for instance, McDevitt examines journalism as a “recursive” institution that engages with intellectuals (and their ideas) and explains them to audiences, often through a veiled opposition to the interpretations of social issues and conditions that then get presented in news as befuddling or incoherent analysis. Journalistic control of dissent is the focus of Chapter 6, where McDevitt performs a study of journalistic coverage surrounding academic Ward Churchill who spoke against U.S. foreign policy that he says led to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Churchill was later shamed and pushed out of his job at University of Colorado Boulder for (what might have been) trumped-up charges of academic misconduct in his writing. Here, McDevitt argues, journalism worked through the pressures of intellect in its rationalizations of terror and anti-Western sentiment, thereby reducing Churchill’s commentary to off-putting, if not blasphemous, symptoms of an outlandish professor lost in a world of *intelligencia*.

McDevitt’s interviews with journalists and professors that look specifically at how and why journalists approach intellectualism, including around the Churchill event, provides a critical and necessary analysis of normative-meets-sociological-meets-cultural interpretations of journalism’s functions in social control. In work reminiscent of Noam Chomsky and Dan Hallin, though written in most places softly as to not spur rebellion against journalism education, training, and practice all at once, McDevitt does give us a welcome critique of the behind-the-scenes of journalistic practice, rhetoric, and control while balancing the prospects for hope in altering journalistic culture in ways to be inviting, or at the very least forgiving, of intellectual discourse in the press.

While this sentiment balances on the same types of symbolic speech that he critiques—calling for a crisis of a particular reasoning without actually naming it as such—it might have been helpful for a bit more of a clear, radical presentation of what McDevitt writes about here and elsewhere in his other work: a U.S. society already populated with racist (read, white) media systems, expanding news deserts, neoliberal

educational connections between media and academic (which McDevitt does interrogate), and a public more than welcome to see media fall apart. It is hard, even with McDevitt's suggested reforms, to see things going up from here for journalism today even though he tries to provide a good starting point for its rise by shining some light on the headless horseman of journalistic power and problems. The only question is if we are willing to disregard all we believe about journalism as a democratic function and be open to its more hidden functions.