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The power of the individual voice: Interrogating continuity at a time when the open communication of research is disrupted by unruly speakers and publics

Lelia Green
Edith Cowan University

Viet Tho Le
Edith Cowan University

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School of Arts and Humanities, Edith Cowan University, Perth, Australia

ABSTRACT

Hyperconnected societies offer new opportunities for the role of the individual voice. A deregulated world of information poses a paradox, however, in which fake news might conceivably underpin the political agenda more than informed research. The sheer amount of information available forces publics and audience members to seek shortcuts to knowledge through access to preferred academic, public intellectual or 'thought leader' perspectives. Drawing upon theories of deliberative democracy and open communication, this paper critiques the roles of academic, public intellectual and thought leader to move beyond discussion of the value of individual voices in the sharing of knowledge. It suggests that both public intellectuals and thought leaders illuminate how the individual voice makes an important contribution in providing continuity when open communication of research is disrupted by unruly speakers and publics.

Introduction

In responding to the idea of 'Future-proofing communication at the academy-societal interface', this paper responds to a significant challenge. Academics in a deregulated world of information cannot help but acknowledge that fake news might conceivably underpin more of the political agenda than informed research (Lazer et al., 2018). 'Share of knowledge' is not reflected in 'share of voice' and even less connected to 'share of power'.

The work of the public intellectual in synthesising and popularising the findings of rigorous research has never been more important (Dahlgren, 2012). In an information-saturated world, publics and audience members seek shortcuts to knowledge. An established personal brand becomes part of a speaker's credibility (for example, Mary Beard, or Brian Cox), while imprimaturs of quality and effectiveness (Nobel prizes, Uber, Extinction Rebellion) indicate to wider publics the thinkers, the changes, and the movements to which they should be paying attention (Brint, 2020; Elshtain, 2014).

The challenge for informed voices seeking to cut through the clamour may appear overwhelming. Being an internet sensation requires a different skillset from rigorous investigation and analysis (Abidin, 2018; Livingstone & Helsper, 2010). Paradoxically, digital cut-through may also reflect support from legacy media (as with Beard and Cox).

CONTACT Lelia Green   l.green@ecu.edu.au

Yet the social interface of education continues to be crucial, and longstanding communication research around societal interfaces, from the 2-step flow of information and opinion leadership (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) through to networked knowledge-sharing and social capital (Lefebvre, Sorenson, Henchion, & Gellynck, 2016), help explain the role of new knowledge champions. Chief among these, in 2019–20, is Greta Thunberg (Kühne, 2019). Her repeated call to 'listen to scientists' (Milman & Smith, 2019) indicates that even as the public sphere becomes more amorphous and diffuse, a clear message spoken authoritatively can galvanise the future and rehabilitate the academy (Thunberg, 2019).

This paper responds to a provocation that suggests the academy will become precarious as a result of open science empowering individual citizens and democratising knowledge. That provocation intimates that, while the academy may still have relevance as an organisation that creates, curates and communicates knowledge, the public may not recognise that relevance and may choose not to connect with the expertise it implies. This paper contributes to the debate by highlighting threads of continuity evident in aspects of the hyperconnected global communication environment while also acknowledging that dynamic change operates as a driving force for disruption. The argument advanced is that futureproofing the links between academy and society rests in a continuing commitment to robust, persuasive research that has the capacity to inspire and influence key social actors. The important contributions made by public intellectuals and thought leaders illuminate the value of the individual voice in providing continuity when unruly speakers and publics disrupt the open communication of research.

Deliberative democracies and 'information shortcuts'

The paper starts with the position that the individual voice is important, and nowhere more so than for those people whose good fortune it is to live in the deliberative democracies that characterise the world's free market economies. In fact, the aspiratory ideals underpinning Western liberal democracies cannot be completely achieved but offer standards to strive for and empirical suggestions for how political processes might work better (Bächtiger, Dryzek, Mansbridge, & Warren, 2018).

Deliberative democracies are jointly constituted both by democracy and by deliberation. Indeed the democratic process, in the words of Kim, Wyatt and Katz, occurs when 'citizens voluntarily and freely participate in discussions on public issues, [and is] a discursive system where citizens share information about public affairs, talk politics, form opinions and participate in political processes' (1999, p. 361). An effective, working, deliberative democracy demands, and always has demanded, access to relevant quality information and a citizenry capable of discerning both the relevance and the quality of the information they encounter.

The exchanges about public affairs that take place between ordinary people are vitally important for a 'talk-centric democracy' (Chambers, 2003). Major studies highlight the role of individual voices and personal influence in mini-publics (Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2004). They are accorded the function of connecting the private realm of people's everyday lifeworlds with the public sphere and ultimately the institutions of governance and the processes of decision-making which take place within these (Chambers, 2012; Habermas, 1996). On the one hand, informal conversations provide opportunities for informal information from everyday discussions to contribute to formal public discussions

by empowering citizens' participation in political debate. On the other hand, informal political chats within social networks motivate participation in the affairs of the day, and improve skills for public discussion (Schmitt-Beck & Grill, 2020).

The promise of the diversity and inclusion of deliberative democracy is a strong fit for the hyperconnected complexity of the contemporary world (Chambers & Gastil, 2020). Boulianne (2009, 2016) suggests that the digital environment offers a more deliberative democracy and potentially shapes change in political engagement and participation. Chen (2020) believes that a deliberative process can foster ordinary citizens' thoughtful discussions on well-being issues. It can also increase civic participation in community development (Boulianne, Chen, & Kahane, 2020).

In political systems, some citizens are relatively more influential within the networks of communication connecting individuals to one another. 'Public intellectuals' and thought leaders are such persons of influence in opinion formation. The established notion of public intellectual is reflected in Russell Jacoby's 1987 definition of the term. He deemed it to mean 'writers and thinkers who address a general and educated audience' (Jacoby, 1987, p. 5). Drezner (2017) points out that today's intellectuals have been facilitated by three factors: the evaporation of public confidence in institutions, the polarisation of society, and increasing economic inequality. The last factor is also the most important factor, according to Drezner (2017), empowering a new kind of public intellectual. Among thought leaders, the most effective are both experts and activists who carry particular weight in the collective deliberations of democratic systems. This weighting system results from the continuing stream of social interactions between citizens (Ahn, Huckfeldt, & Ryan, 2014).

Considering the role of the media, Dahlgren (2002) identifies four elements contributing to public involvement in politics prior to the adoption of digital networks. These are: 'media exposure, talking about media output, opinion formation, and political participation' (2002, p. 16). He starts with the idea that 'media exposure is a necessary precondition for deliberation and the power of the voice to cut through' (Dahlgren, 2002, p. 16). His argument acknowledges that media exposure helps create raw material that people use as they work together in social settings to form opinions around political participation. Dahlgren's comment recognises the well-established agenda-setting role (Dahlgren, 2005, 2013) traditionally performed by legacy media in its capacity to amplify the power of the individual voice (Dahlgren, 2012). Such a perspective echoes the role of personal influence in developing people's opinions and aligns with the 2-step flow theory of information (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). In this model, information is first judged important by opinion leaders, and then by those they influence. Arguably, the power of the individual voice is relevant both in micro communication exchanges, around the water cooler (Brewster, Croucher, Wood, & Brookes, 2007; Morrison, Wheeler-Smith, & Kamdar, 2011), and in global debates where single voices can cut through the cacophony to speak directly and authoritatively to a nation or generation, and across divisions of age, culture, class and religious affiliation (Castells, 2008; da Conceição-heldt & Meunier, 2014; Thunberg, 2019).

The hyperconnected networks of the digital world create opportunities for citizens to adopt 'information shortcuts' for making good decisions (Somin, 2016). Among many different types of shortcuts, publics may follow the directions of thought leaders who share similar values but are notable for their knowledge of public policy issues. Connectivity leads to a networked knowledge-sharing and social capital base (Lefebvre et al., 2016), helping explain the role of knowledge champions as providing information shortcuts. Over time

people come to trust that a specific speaker will deliver relevant, quality information, thus assigning credibility to the power of the individual voice.

Open access to information?

The open communication of science, and the public's access to the fruits of academic labour more generally, have created opportunities for broadening the academy-societal interface. Academic publication models tend to lock up intellectual content behind paywalls that create shareholder value for publishers' investors, instead of informing citizens. In addition to the people who currently read academic outputs normally needing their institution to pay a subscription fee, there is the added matter of the voluntary labour of academic peer review systems. These review activities add value and serve as a proxy guarantee of quality. They are usually financed as part of the relevant academic's government/student funded role. The journal in which you read this article, for example, has a paywall and is funded via subscription, which may have been paid for by a university or a particularly engaged (and most likely tenured) academic, or bundled with an annual membership subscription to a learned association.

This model of access to the outcomes of scholarly research tends to exclude say, fifteen-year old schoolgirls: the age that Greta Thunberg was when she started what is now the School Strike for Climate campaign (Green, 2020). With government funding and university students' co-payment contributions typically financing academic labour, and with both finance streams implying that such work should be for the public good, equity would suggest that academic outputs should be available to all interested citizens, regardless of age, and without a user-pays cost.

Equity similarly underpins the view that open access is a minimum starting point from which to address the systemic disadvantage impacting the global South. The majority world's traditional intellectual property and productive labour have been ruthlessly exploited by the global North over the centuries; before, during and after colonisation. There are compelling reasons why academic work and evidence-based research should circulate freely through global social knowledge networks, offering benefit where relevant. Not least of these reasons is the disproportionate impact of early manifestations of the climate emergency upon the global South, which has contributed least to the crisis. Even so, it is the South which is bearing the brunt of the social and political, as well as the environmental, consequences (Mitlin & Satterthwaite, 2013; Rigg, 2007). Reassuringly, there is evidence of a significant trend towards global access to knowledge.

In an article that provides an overview of the growing momentum of the open access movement, *New Scientist* journalist Lawton (2018) argues that the world is poised on the cusp of change. Noting that scientific publishing has been characterised by 'big money, piracy, hacking, infighting, fake news and free speech', mirroring the journalism/social media debates canvassed above, Lawton constructs the issue of open access as nothing less than a battle for the 'soul of science itself' (Lawton, 2018). He predicts that within 10 years all publicly funded knowledge will be open for public access and able to circulate through debate and discussion, informing an educated and engaged citizenry (Lawton, 2018). The move towards open scholarship and open science consequently helps rehabilitate the academy-societal interface whilst also allowing knowledge champions, both public intellectuals and thought leaders, to engage with publics around their evidence.

The next section considers the juxtaposition of the academy and society and highlights both the role of personal influence (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) and that of the individual voice in hyperconnected societies. Before doing this, it will consider the different roles and contributions of public intellectuals, thought leaders and legacy media.

Academy-societal interface in hyperconnected societies

A straightforward, but not entirely accurate depiction of the public intellectual and the thought leader might align the intellectual with the academy and the charismatic, but not necessarily qualified thought leader (Drezner, 2017) with society. Although the roles can be distinguished, they are not necessarily distinct and rely upon each other for maximum beneficial effectiveness. Ideally, the academy connects with thought leaders who arise from specific social contexts, but who can communicate across generations, cultures and continents. Through engagement, the academy has continuing relevance: even at a time of disruption via unruly speakers and publics. Indeed, effective movements for change generally include input from both thought leaders and academics.

Margaret Mead is credited with first noting that 'a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has' (Mead, as quoted in Applewhite, Evans, & Frothingham, 2003, p. 69). Indeed, the Western democratic model, and the notion of free speech that it champions (Nunziato, 2009; Stone, 2008; Warburton, 2009) entails a dynamic engagement between a group of people, and ideas. The capacity for an individual to motivate and be part of just such a group is offered as evidence for the continuing power of the individual voice. Voices that cut through, however, have to stand out from the crowd. Even before open communication of research, hyperconnectivity connects interested publics with an effectively infinite number of speakers, philosophies and perspectives. The links between these entities are so diverse and numerous that an attempt to examine them can be overwhelming. Unravelling is connectivity represents the core of the business model upon which Google and other search engines are based (Halavais, 2017; Lewandowsk, Kerkmann, Rümmele, & Sünkler, 2018; Vise & Malseed, 2005).

Over the past generation, information consumers (Nicholas et al., 2003) have acquired the power to change systems and algorithms to reflect the number of people using a system and the types of usage made. Indeed, citizens in Western democracies have become well aware that when they pay attention to content, that in and of itself creates value. Digital activity is tracked, recorded and monetised and people are reluctantly learning to see themselves as organisms that produce 'data' (Lupton, 2018). Additionally, the contributions people make in their role as 'content creators' (Green & Jenkins, 2014; Holton, Coddington, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013) helps inform the knowledge they gain, driving the algorithmic determinants of others' information feeds. The 'likes' and the comments (Thorson, 2014; Winter, Brückner, & Krämer, 2015), are homogenised and commodified with the anticipated outcome of delivering 'eyeballs' (Ju, Jeong, & Chyi, 2014; Mandiberg, 2012), or 'audience share' (Papacharissi, 2007; Sullivan, 2019), to the greater good of the media platforms they use and the advertisers who fund it and the shareholders who reap the dividends. Thus, even when the western democratic/free-market model of open communication is working well, the market place for ideas is essentially one that is distorted by algorithms and dynamics that foster profit and relative platform advantage.

Such distortions are routinely subject to further complications. In addition to the market itself, there is a range of philosophical perspectives and cultural groupings that do not support open knowledge and seek to undermine western information networks. One signal example of this is the Cambridge Analytica scandal that cost Facebook a (temporary but significant) drop in share value, and a large fine (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018; Isaak & Hanna, 2018; Vaidhyanathan, 2018). The scandal revealed Facebook's capacity for being appropriated to spruik fake news and extremist views (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018; Isaak & Hanna, 2018), as well as its potential to contribute to social fragmentation, and ideological polarisation (DiFranzo & Gloria-Garcia, 2017). Following the Cambridge Analytica scandal, Vaidhyanathan (2018) states that 'Facebook undermines their [the institutions'] ability to support healthy public deliberation. Facebook distorts the very sources of news and information on which a democratic republic relies' (p.8). Such distortions increasingly speak to publics who embrace conspiracy theories, providing ample evidence, for those who don't, that the openness of communication is being disrupted by unruly speakers and publics. Even so, stellar examples remain of the open communication of science cutting through the maelstrom and offering proof that fact can still underpin public discussion, countering and challenging unwarranted assertions and ill-informed speculation (Dennis, 2018; Lee, Choi, Kim, & Kim, 2014; Meraz, 2009; Yin, 1999).

Media and the power of the individual voice

Although digital communication channels have disrupted the 'rivers of (advertising) gold' (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission [ACCC], 2019, p. 56; Flew & Wilding, 2020) that used to fund quality journalism, the legacy media continues to play a vital part in curating, gatekeeping and providing informed comment. Given that younger generations have lost the habit of tuning into a news programme or reading a newspaper, it is tempting to believe that such organisations no longer have relevance. This is a misconstruction. It is not that there is no ongoing need for the professional journalism skills that characterise legacy media output: there is. Indeed, as the ACCC inquiry identified, the recirculating of legacy media content is a major contributor to the 'stickiness' of digital platforms, helping attract and retain their audiences (ACCC, 2019).

The issue is that while quality journalism remains needed and valued for its agenda setting and validation roles (McCombs, 2018; McCombs & Shaw, 2016), it has never been directly funded by those who need and value it. Instead it is funded by organisations intent on delivering 'audiences for sale to advertisers' (Smythe, 1977, p. 16). The challenge is to persuade consumers used to accessing quality content without a clear cost threshold that the quality content in question is worth paying for. Essentially, the search is on for new models to fund quality journalism while incentivising consumer-pays practices. The indication is that some of the innovative strategies to achieve this outcome are working (Albarran, 2016; Küng, 2015), partly because readers and audiences appreciate that journalistic practice interrogates speakers on their behalf, in order to inform selection of the individual voices that society should pay attention to. And this is where Dahlgren's (2002) perceived role of the media in identifying and amplifying voices remains relevant.

This is not to say that legacy media does not benefit from the challenges offered by the current chaos and anarchy evident in the free market of ideas. Glasgow Media Group (Eldridge, 2000; Philo, 2014) is one of a range of critical commentators that point to the well-established tendency of legacy media to support 'the establishment'. Further, on occasion, the media put profit and shareholder value before objective truth-telling. At the same time, reflecting the patterns inherent in the adversarial nature of the Westminster model of deliberative democracy, and the prosecution and defence perspectives of the courts that underpin law and order in such democracies, the media has a default setting of enlisting speakers from the more extreme perspectives to foster public debate. Consensus and agreement don't make a 'story', and the successful identification of a middle path is much less likely to inform a satisfying water cooler debate than open discord. Given this, the traditional patterns of privilege accruing to the legacy media have themselves been challenged by the digital disruptions assigned to unruly speakers and publics: to the benefit of deliberative democracy.

It is in this context that social media, as a specific incarnation of digital media, is identifying and highlighting voices that achieve break-through against a background of chaos and cacophony. Social media, and the platforms that support them, help information consumers identify the sources juxtaposed to legacy media. This dynamic recognises that digital media is increasingly the underpinning technology for legacy media, as well as for social media. A case study from Vietnam, where the legacy media is under the control of the government, provides valuable evidence of the channels through which social media exerts influence on public opinion and, as a direct consequence, upon the content carried in legacy media (Le, 2018). In order to maintain relevance, legacy media are forced to acknowledge the voices and arguments highlighted by disruptive social media. Legacy titles cannot pretend that they alone are the arbiters of what is worth paying attention to when a significant proportion of citizens are engaged with and debating alternative voices. So how is the role of the public intellectual impacted by the different perspectives of the legacy media on the one hand and social media on the other?

Critiquing the roles of public intellectual and thought leader

The contest between media forms, between legacy media and social media, is a significant element contributing to the formation of 'unruly speakers and publics'. It also supports the development of a double meaning to the term 'public intellectual'. In traditional media terms, this role been reserved for established intellectuals who were willing to engage with the public through relevant and accessible discourse, and whose opinions are valued by the legacy media that championed them. Examples might include the historian, Mary Beard, and the physicist Brian Cox.

Mary Beard and Brian Cox, as examples, do not only have expertise in a particular field, but also have a talent for communicating with a wide and diverse audience. Mary Beard, Professor of Classics at the University of Cambridge, is more than one of the world's best-known classicists. She is also widely known for 'her interventions in public life [that] offer an alternative mode of discourse, one that people are hungry for: a position that is serious and tough in argument, but friendly and humorous in manner, and one that, at a time when disagreements quickly become shrill or abusive, insists on dialogue' (Higgins, 2018). Meanwhile, Brian Cox, Professor of Physics at Manchester

University, was a pop musician with band D:Ream before focusing on a career in science. He is known for publicising scientific thought, theory and fact to a broad audience through popular science programmes and accessible publishing that targets lay readers such as (Cox & Forshaw, 2009) *Why Does E = mc2? (And Why Should We Care?).*

In digital contexts, however, a new generation of social media users has refined the definition of 'public intellectual' to identify certain individuals whose work is valued by sufficient numbers, groups and cross-sections of the connected global audience to be elevated to public prominence. This perspective aligns with the shift in focus from a traditional emphasis upon the intellectual element of the public intellectual as validated by the imprimatur of the academy, to the conception of public intellectual that foregrounds the power of the public to claim and celebrate its own intellectuals. This dynamic, in effect, highlights the fact that being an intellectual is only one of the ways in which a person can be identified as having a powerful individual voice capable of functioning as the promoter of reason and as a wellspring of ideas that nurture political debate and active citizenship. It emphasises the public element of the public intellectual: the intellectual component is assigned importance because the public has decided that the content speaks to them in a direct way.

Accepting the possible contestation around whether the emphasis is placed on 'public' or on 'intellectual', Dahlgren (2012) nonetheless locates public intellectuals as embedded in 'the structural setting of mediated public spheres with a particular emphasis on the online sector' (2012, p. 95). It is the many-to-many communication enabled by hyperconnectivity that is constructed as disrupting the orderly advance of political ideas. While it is eminently arguable as to whether such order ever truly existed, even in the pre-internet era, Dahlgren's hope for the public intellectual is that their voice and input will motivate an engaged citizenry 'towards the ideal of a talking public' (2002, p. 9).

While a talking public is a defining characteristic of deliberative democracy, the full realisation of effective government as an operational ideal assumes that the talk engaged in by the relevant public should be based on informed comment and opinion rather than fake news (Farkas & Schou, 2019; McKay & Tenove, 2020), flaky politics, unruly speakers and fractured publics. It is in these circumstances that the reputable, but legacy media institutions of western democracies may operate as honest brokers (Edwards, 2001; Livingstone & Lunt, 1994) in identifying fact from fiction (Schwalbe, Silcock, & Candello, 2015); elevating some opinions while casting doubt (or scorn) upon others (Munson & Resnick, 2010; Schnell, 2001). While younger social media-infused publics may find this role problematic, in that it can seem stuffy, elitist and even somewhat anti-democratic (Fuchs, 2013; McChesney, 2016), the circulation of legacy media-curated comment on and by social media (Newman, 2011; Tsagkias, De Rijke, & Weerkamp, 2011) means that such legacy institutions continue to have relevance across generations and without regard to platform. Accordingly, younger citizens may tacitly accept that public intellectuals have a role to play while simultaneously resisting the sense of an entitlement to speak conferred upon them by the legacy media.

But can a non-intellectual really be termed a public intellectual? And, if not, what role does such an individual play? Drezner (2017) argues against an ideal whereby democratic engagement is positioned as the particular purview of the public intellectual. He suggests that the 'traditional public intellectual' is more 'ready to explain why some new policy idea is unlikely to work' (2017, p. 101) than they are to promote a positive vision for the future. This conception of the public intellectual is one that operates in critique, a voice

that teases out possibilities and consequences, likely fact and probable fiction, from the suggestions that circulate in the political domain. Drezner (2017) identifies a need for a more proactive role then 'critic'. He assigns that role to a group of people whom he terms 'thought leaders'. Drezner's view is that these citizens should have a 'positive idea for change and the conviction that they can make a difference' (p. 101). This positioning of the thought leader returns the paper to Margaret Mead's 'small group of thoughtful, committed citizens [who] can change the world'. Ultimately, to be a member of Mead's group, someone needs to have a belief in their capacity to make a difference and the confidence that they know the difference to be made. Drezner (2017) recognises a role for both elements of the public intellectual/thought leader duo whereby thought leaders produce new ideas that have the capacity to excite and energise others as to the potential for change, and public intellectuals analyse and critique those ideas.

Greta Thunberg, in her much-repeated injunction 'listen to the scientists' (Milman & Smith, 2019) provides an example of a thought leader who champions knowledge. Her acknowledgement that she knows that something is wrong, and knows whom she trusts to have the best path forward in addressing that wrong, establishes her as a thought leader who is pointing her generation to respect the work of experts in the relevant fields. But Thunberg is more than a touchstone for a generation. Thunberg harnesses a range of publics who seek to pressure government (and industry, and the financial markets) to develop policies to respect core, informed, evidence-based knowledge as the underpinning impetus for public action and decision-making. She does this through using the power of her individual voice to link with and influence generations beyond her own. One of Thunberg's strategies for achieving this goal is in communicating with established public intellectuals that already have cut-through voices in their own right, with their own key publics. David Attenborough and Jane Goodall are appropriate examples of such people, but Thunberg also aligns herself as being against the 'enemies' of her cause, showing herself to be more than a match for an intellectual contest with past President of the United States, Donald Trump. Thunberg's thought leadership aligns her with key public intellectuals, and against enemies of knowledge, while her words communicate authoritatively across generations, cultures and contexts.

Thunberg is offered as a shining exemplar of the continuing power of the individual voice communicating across time and space regardless of the disruption caused by unruly speakers and publics. Too young to vote at an age where she galvanised millions around the globe, few thought leaders in history have achieved the impact Thunberg enabled through the power of hyperconnected media. She sparks the imaginations of those who champion the role of knowledge in helping the world work through a series of existence-limiting challenges. The contribution made by Thunberg and her audiences continues to inform political processes in the world's deliberative democracies (Devaney et al., 2020). With luck, the impact of Thunberg's ideas will mean that her generation is not the last one to repurpose old terms for new circumstances.

Conclusion

This paper has suggested the importance both of public intellectuals and thought leaders in illuminating the role played by the individual voice in providing continuity at a time when the open communication of research is disrupted by unruly speakers and publics.

The synthesis of these two roles allows for the refinement of possibilities and the nuanced development of ways forward that strengthen the operation of deliberative democracies. Such a dynamic helps identify key priorities while making the actions of an engaged citizenry more relevant and effective. This complementarity of thought leaders with public intellectuals potentially serves as the yin and yang of what might be termed the role of knowledge championship. Together and separately the thought leader and public intellectual produce and promote knowledge, but in different ways, using complementary and mutually beneficial starting points. In effect knowledge champions, as represented in the work of thought leaders and public intellectuals, provide examples of continuity around the power of the individual voice to make a difference to the societies in which they live. They do this work in defiance of disruption by unruly publics and speakers. Arguably open science, and society-wide access to the fruits of knowledge, support the rise of knowledge championship in promoting an alignment between the direction in which society is moving and the one that science has identified as being beneficial.

The 'small group of thoughtful, committed citizens' championed by Mead do offer a vision of continuity over time, proving the power of the individual voice and vision to change the world, one argument at a time, society by society in a hyperconnected globe. As a dynamic underpinning, Dahlgren (2002, 2009) advances a model for a civic cultures framework. This second model has six over-lapping, inter-related dimensions: identities; knowledge; practices; spaces; trust, and values (paraphrasing and essentialising Dahlgren, 2009, p. 123). These dimensions are arranged here in alphabetical order, which puts the element 'identities' first, which has the added benefit of reflecting Dahlgren's positioning of that aspect of civic engagement as being the most important one. Dahlgren conceptualises identities as interacting with knowledge, practices, spaces, trust and values to create the framework within which ideas circulate through and across societies.

One possible reason why identities are elevated in Dahlgren's framework is that they are developed and informed in interaction with the ideas circulated through culture by the dual agency of public intellectuals and thought leaders. Socially engaged knowledge champions potentially motivate individual engagement with complex arguments, prompting the discussion of ideas within and between social and political networks. This work of the knowledge champion becomes especially crucial in an era of fake news, flaky politics, unruly speakers and fractured publics. That's because the knowledge champion's lone voice gives an opportunity for people to cut through the clutter and see clearly what it is that needs to be discussed; what it is that needs to be prioritised, what it is that needs to be considered at a time of change. Further, the open communication of science improves the possibility that the discussion will proceed in an evidence-based direction.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

Lelia Green is Professor of Communications in the School of Arts and Humanities, Edith Cowan University (ECU). She is the ECU node leader of the Australian Research Council's Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child and has been researching children's and young people's engagement with digital media for over twenty years.

Dr. Viet Tho Le is a Research Assistant in the School of Arts and Humanities, Edith Cowan University.

ORCID

Lelia Green   http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4587-4679
Viet Tho Le   http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2143-6092

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