



Donald Trump and the Decline of the Ideas Industry

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The 2016 U.S. presidential campaign pitted a wonk with decades of experience and fastidious command of public policy against a reality television star who not only eschewed nuance but seemed to take great pride in not reading or talking to experts. Whereas Hillary Clinton offered substantive arguments, Donald Trump countered with platitudes and invective. He not only won the election but has doubled down on that approach, staffing his administration almost entirely with people with no conventional political experience. And while his critics remain glued to every Twitter or TV tirade, hoping to extract even the smallest nugget of policy understanding, President Trump's supporters tune into different news outlets altogether, making dialogue between the two camps nearly impossible.

How did we get here?

Author and academic Daniel W. Drezner offers a compelling explanation in his new book "[The Ideas Industry: How Pessimists, Partisans, and Plutocrats are Transforming the Marketplace of Ideas](#)" (Oxford University Press).

Like Drezner, I've been part of that industry in some fashion for going on a quarter century. We've both been university professors, think tankers, op-ed writers, bloggers, and tweeters. He's been wildly more successful at these enterprises, rising to become a full professor at a top public policy school, a blogger for the Washington Post, and a regular television commentator. Despite different vantage points, we've both witnessed the struggles of the academy, policy shops, and intellectual life firsthand and have been reading, thinking, and writing about these topics for quite some time. While much of what Drezner writes is therefore reminder rather than revelation, he provides substantial value simply by bringing it all together into a coherent narrative, in many cases making connections that hadn't occurred to me.

Drezner's central theme is that the media and economic environment has changed from one that rewards public intellectuals ("experts who are versed and trained enough to be able to comment on a wide range of policy issues") to one that elevates "thought leaders" ("intellectual evangelists" who "develop their own singular lens to explain the world, and then proselytize that worldview to anyone within earshot"). Public intellectuals are "foxes" (who know a lot of different things), while thought leaders are "hedgehogs" (who know one thing very well). The former are "critics" while the latter are "creators." The former are skeptics; the latter true

believers. The former are deductive; the latter inductive. The former prioritizes expertise; the latter, experience. The former are pessimists; the latter, optimists.

Thought leaders have risen at the expense of public intellectuals due largely to three interlocking trends that configure the modern marketplace of ideas: the erosion of trust in authority, the polarization of American politics, and the dramatic increase in economic inequality.

This decline in expertise, which Drezner links back to the days of Vietnam and Watergate, has led to a public tendency to eliminate exposure to alternative viewpoints by selecting schools, news sources, authors, and pundits that amplify rather than challenge an individual's worldview. Combined with the human tendency to prefer confident, bold predictions and pronouncements to nuanced concepts, it becomes very difficult for public intellectuals to persuade people to their side.

Drezner stresses the rise of economic inequality above all the other ailments in American public life. Essentially, everyone from professors to would-be authors to think tanks must now compete for funding from an increasing number of newly-rich billionaires. Rather than funding large institutions to do good work, as did their predecessors in the early part of the 20th century, this new class of plutocrats is seeking to fund those who will flatter them and reinforce their prejudices.

The book is organized topically, using the rise (and sometimes fall) of various thought leaders as illustrations. The first, and most detailed, is that of Jeffrey Sachs, "a brilliant economist, a fact that he is happy to tell you himself." Sachs was on the path to being a superstar public intellectual, becoming a tenured full professor of economics at Harvard at the absurdly young age of 28, cranking out a prodigious amount of quality academic work, and advising heads of state. Over time, though, he would rise to fame with a series of books claiming -- against all evidence collected by professionals in the field -- that he had unearthed simple solutions to global poverty. He relentlessly and brilliantly promoted these books with constant speeches and media appearances, and by cultivating alliances with the rich and powerful, including the likes of Bono and George Soros. While leading economists were constantly raising red flags, Sachs managed for years to simply dismiss them with bombast. The experts had facts, data, and narratives but they were complicated, confusing, and told a depressing tale. Sachs was a better storyteller offering a happily ever after. While his star is not as bright as it once was, he's still routinely quoted on television and cranking out book after book.

Perhaps the more cautionary tale is that of Dinesh D'Souza, who turned a stint at the Dartmouth Review in the early 1980s into a prominent career as a conservative public intellectual. He evolved into a thought leader and is now a convicted felon and laughingstock. His early works, while polemical, followed the conventions of the old system. His breakout book, "Illiberal Education," was excerpted in *The Atlantic Monthly* and won praise in such outlets as *The New Republic* and the *New York Review of Books*. He soon realized, however, that he could make far more money generating controversy than by pleasing critics. He wrote ever-more-hyperbolic books and turned that into regular appearances as a television talking head and coveted speaker on the lecture circuit. While most serious intellectuals dismissed him as a hack -- even prior to

his criminal convictions for sexual misconduct and illegal campaign contributions -- his books sell like hotcakes and have spawned cult documentaries. He has even given interviews from prison.

While nuance is still prized in the academy and some elite circles, the pressures of the ever-more-crowded marketplace of ideas push the media industry toward simplicity and confidence. A 300-page Academic Press book with 900 footnotes may win tenure, prizes, and prestige, but a 10-minute TED talk that goes viral will be more likely to gain the attention of those with deep pockets -- and yield media interviews, speaking engagements, and invitations to hobnob with the elites at Davos and a dozen other conclaves that have sprung up to flatter the egos of the rich and powerful.

All of this means not only that the ideas that win the backing of the well-off are more likely to spread, but that those that don't are less likely to get voiced at all, lest they offend the funders. Plutocrats, especially those who perceive their enormous wealth as self-made, will naturally have "a sense of meritocratic achievement," an obliviousness to the advantages they had and the obstacles others face, and a real impatience with the notion that all problems lack an easy solution. Increasingly, they're wealthy enough to bypass the state and the messiness of politics and process altogether, creating massive foundations to take direct action. This puts traditional public intellectuals, who are naturally skeptical of quick, easy solutions, at a tremendous disadvantage, while thought leaders are quite comfortable championing "disruption, self-empowerment, and entrepreneurial ability" to fix big problems.

This particular charge -- that the academy has become too focused on quantitative data and specialized jargon -- especially grates Drezner. While conceding that the slow nature of the peer review process and a penchant for hedging puts academics at a disadvantage in an arena that values real-time, simple, and confident answers to problems, he notes that many social scientists serve as important public intellectuals and also serve stints in government. Regardless, Drezner believes that traditional academics are losing out in the race for plutocratic investors to those, like economists, who proclaim confidently that government officials, corporate CEOs, and other decision-makers can improve policy outcomes by following simple advice.

The problems plaguing modern think tanks are also instructional. As Drezner explains, the old-time "universities without students" model of scholars working on research that interested them with few strings attached has morphed into one where funders -- whether wealthy individuals, corporations, or governments -- drive the train. This isn't a wholly new phenomenon. The Heritage Foundation and Cato Institute were both founded in the early 1970s by wealthy funders with an ideological agenda. But even those institutions have become much more politicized and less amenable to scholarship that colors outside the lines in recent years. This is true even at nonpartisan think tanks. Because they compete with elite universities (which tend to have some insulation because of large endowments) and an incredible number of other think tanks for attention and funding, there is extreme pressure to satisfy clients and potential donors. This trend was exacerbated by the financial crisis of 2008, when many traditional funding sources dried up, further increasing the power of plutocrats and somewhat unsavory foreign actors willing to spend lots of money to bolster their causes and lend prestige to their ideas. Even the loftiest of think

tanks -- such as the Brookings Institution and the Council on Foreign Relations -- court the wealthy and powerful, showering them with privileged access. Worse yet, many of the scholars employed by these organizations do lucrative private consulting for industry, often without disclosing the inherent conflict while publishing under their researcher hat.

While I don't believe I ever saw a scholar write something they didn't believe in order to serve a client, I certainly saw reports written at the behest of clients on topics that had little bearing on the institution's mission. Often, those reports were rather thin on research, transparently parroting the corporate views of the funder. Moreover, the existence of funding relationships essentially made it impossible to comment on topics that would otherwise have been in our wheelhouse; that was especially true in cases where the commentary would have put the funder in a bad light. Relatedly, because attracting high-profile policymakers to appear at events is an important part of the business model of most policy shops, there is substantial pressure to avoid alienating them.

The part of the industry least familiar to me is the relatively recent rise of for-profit thought leaders. While firms like McKinsey, A.D. Little, and Booz Allen have been around for years, they were initially engaged in management consulting in the private sector. Slowly, those firms, along with newer ones like the Boston Consulting Group, Eurasia Group, and a slew of firms started by former cabinet secretaries, have expanded their portfolios into direct competition with academics, public intellectuals, and think tankers, offering direct policy advice to governments. While their analysis is often, in the judgment of Drezner and others, shoddy by scholarly standards, it's more desirable to policymakers and corporate decision-makers than that provided by the rest of the Ideas Industry. Because the analysis is ostensibly bespoke, it's considered more valuable than generic analysis of a policy or business sector. They also tend to excel "at finding the one number, metric, or chart that will capture the attention of the audience, the 'takeaway' stat that even the innumerate can comprehend." And, because someone is willing to pay for it, it is naturally perceived to be of higher quality than advice peddled for free. Further, because the information is proprietary, there is a built-in excuse to refuse to share the data and analytical methods with the outside world, making it next to impossible to scrutinize, much less falsify.

Drezner worries about the rise of individual "brands" and the dangerous incentives the phenomenon creates. He contrasts Walter Lippman, perhaps the prototypical public intellectual of the last century, with Fareed Zakaria, who is arguably the most noteworthy one of the current era. Both were and are relatively centrist and elusive ideologically, allowing them to be referenced by politicians and intellectuals of both parties. Both authored several books that were not only commercially successful but praised by policymakers and academics alike. But their careers highlight the stark differences in the intellectual environments in which they operated.

There was simply less competition, scrutiny, and potential to go astray in Lippman's day. It was, in Drezner's words, "a genteel oligopoly" in which a handful of gatekeepers decided whose ideas were worth spreading, a very narrow orthodoxy prevailed, and indiscretions were kept in-house. By contrast, the rise of 24/7 broadcast media and the Internet has removed the gatekeepers and created a free-for-all in which those who most successfully market themselves get the lion's share of the attention and financial rewards that come with it.

A superstar brand -- Zakaria, Thomas Friedman, and Niall Ferguson are highlighted -- can make \$50,000 to \$75,000 a speech and give variants of the same talk over and over to well-heeled audiences. But this has skewed the marketplace, making the books and articles that used to be at the heart of intellectual life mere “billboards for the messengers.” And, again, it helps if the message is one that those able to pay that kind of money want to hear -- flattering to the plutocratic class and simplifying the world into pithy mantras that are easy to repeat.

Aside from the pressure to please the monied class, staying on top requires constant grinding. Those who turn down television appearances and speaking opportunities too often will soon start being asked less. At the same time, the books and articles need to be cranked out in order to provide fodder for these talks. Inevitably, this leads to cutting corners. Less research goes into the books. Or the research -- if not the writing itself -- gradually gets farmed out to assistants. In Zakaria’s case, this resulted in the plagiarism of others’ work, presumably because of shoddy practices by low-paid staffers rather than his own intention. In Ferguson’s and D’Souza’s cases, once-brilliant thinkers simply became hacks.

Drezner includes, as he puts it, “the Requisite Chapter on Social Media.” He focuses, naturally, on blogs and Twitter, media at which he’s not only excelled but on which he has built his brand over the last 15 years. Both have vastly expanded the marketplace of ideas, allowing intellectuals to tout their finished work, float raw ideas and improve them through feedback from a global network, and quickly find new information. While Drezner and I have both benefitted tremendously from these positive aspects, there is also a huge dark side to social media: its tendency to amplify the worst aspects of the human condition. The democratization that makes all the advantages of blog commentary and Twitter exchanges possible also means that there is no one to filter out inaccuracy, stupidity, bias, and venality. Those with larger followings -- and especially those who aren’t straight white males -- will inevitably face vicious attack and trolling. This not only “increased the costs of online interaction,” but forces writers to either expend mental and emotional energy dealing with abuse or to tune out the commentary entirely and lose feedback that is actually valuable. The problem is even worse in some fields of inquiry. Middle East scholar Marc Lynch, a prominent blogger and Tweeter, laments that many legitimate experts simply refuse to engage in debate on the region “because of the online cesspool such interventions inevitably attract.”

Drezner does not offer much hope for solving any of the problems laid out in his book, but he does caution that “we cannot and should not try to go back to the good old days” and that many of the trends are in fact irreversible.

“Things are not worse than they used to be. They are just bad in a different way,” writes Drezner. While trolling and the sheer quantity of dreck being produced are bad, there has been real social benefit to removing the old gatekeepers and allowing a much wider segment of the population to vie to have their ideas heard.

Will the public give genuine intellectualism a second chance? Alas, many of Drezner’s proposed solutions -- larger endowments at universities and think tanks, a greater role for

“philanthrocapitalists” -- undercut the central critique in his book, offering up much of the same for a question still lacking an obvious answer.