

The separation of knowledge and the concentration of power – what role can the media play today?

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'Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed nonage. Nonage is the inability to use one's own understanding without another's guidance. This nonage is self-imposed if its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in indecision and lack of courage to use one's own mind without another's guidance. Dare to know! (Sapere aude.) "Have the courage to use your own understanding," is therefore the motto of the enlightenment.'

Immanuel Kant, 'What is Enlightenment?'

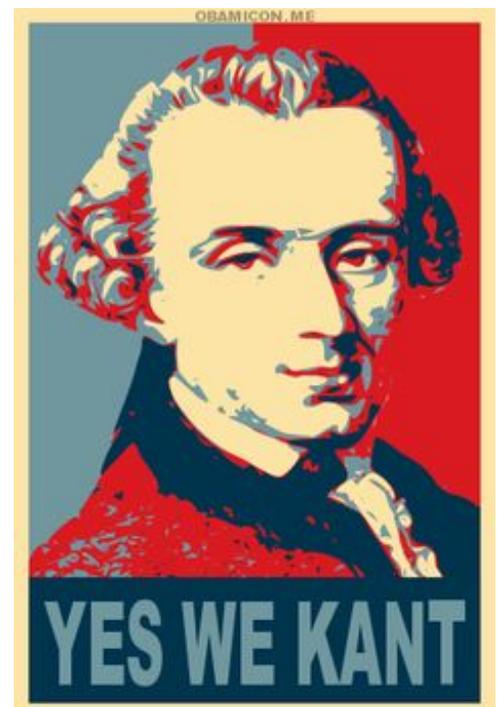
The work of an intellectual is not to mould the political will of others; it is, through the analyses that he does in his own field, to re-examine evidence and assumptions, to shake up habitual ways of working and thinking, to dissipate conventional familiarities, to re-evaluate rules and institutions and to participate in the formation of a political will.'

Michel Foucault, 'The Concern for Truth'

Now one may ask, how do Kant or Foucault relate to the role journalism or the media play in our lives today?

Kant referred to the need of what he coined as 'the public use of reason', which should make us reflect on our current predicament. He defines the Enlightenment motto as an imperative to confront the challenge of giving value to our human agency by pursuing knowledge – using it with one's own reason and understanding, without external guidance and imposition. Furthermore, Kant makes a distinction between the private and public use of reason. Private use of reason refers, in our age, to a job or position in office. For example, a postman, a sales assistant, or an investment banker, are making use of their private reason when undertaking these positions. On the other hand, the public use of reason refers to our reflections on these tasks, which may take various forms. If you realise the company you work for is behaving unethically, and you decide to write a note to your boss expressing your concerns, you would be making use of your public reason. Alternatively, if you're having a discussion with friends on, for example, the government's enactment of particular policies, you are also making use of public reason. It's the use of agency – our capacity to think and act free from others' guidance and constraints, to contribute to the shaping of our surroundings.

Similarly, Foucault viewed our current intellectual task as criticising established and normalised standards of belief, so that one can reveal



their true nature and 'fight against them'; to criticise institutions which appear both independent and neutral, but which truly unmask complex and subtle tactics of power over the modern subject.

Our capitalist model works within an economic framework that is both the object and means of power. It causes individuals to lack time or motivation to stand outside the machine in which they operate in order to think about *how* it is operating. As a result, power is able to function autonomously, as it remains widely unquestioned, facilitating public acquiescence through ignorance.

The neoliberal model in the west predominantly advocates a society based on specialization of knowledge, skills and expertise, in a quest for economic productivity, efficiency, and progress. Inevitably there are social and political consequences. Knowledge is dispersed; the market seeks and offers specific skills set for particular jobs. As a result, the wider context that we inhabit becomes redundant, as it no longer seems to directly affect us, nor do we feel that we have a substantive say in its process.

As renowned intellectual Noam Chomsky claimed, we are becoming merely 'cogs in a machine'; a machine designed by others, characterized by increasingly complex mechanisms, and as such requiring meticulous work to keep it running. This socio-economic structure leads to a public sense of apathy towards the jobs individuals pursue as well as the economic and political system in which their lives function. The western emphasis on the 'individual' and its inviolability leads to a limited interest for other issues besides one's own, causing estrangement from the wider context.

The media is capable of undermining this separation by exposing the public to knowledge beyond its private sphere; it makes us contemplate on issues that would otherwise remain unknown and ignored, and thus encourages the individual's connection with and contribution to shaping its environment. Of course, to do this to its full potential, the media would need to be uncorrupted by corporations or politicians.

The Internet, one may argue, has revolutionised our reasoning now that we can express our thoughts and contribute to public discussions. While it has this potential, we should be wary of the effect of the 'digital revolution' – the market model has invaded this unconstrained version of the Internet platform. It is now utilised by high-tech companies using surveillance measures that allow the construction of virtual user profiles based on the consumer's activities. They categorise and define an individual through automated systems that operate according to preferences. This cages the individual into a virtual categorisation and undermines the potential for knowledge and understanding of other aspects of the world.

The economic framework in which we function online causes the public use of reason to stagnate. The media's role should provoke our thoughts by providing us information and perspectives on aspects of the world that seem distant or redundant to our focused lives, to ultimately encourage a use of agency philosophers as Kant and Foucault had envisioned; and that many prior and subsequent scholars tried to revive, namely, a critical and reasoned stance that can contribute to the creation of the machine we operate in.

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