

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

TECH'S BLIND SPOTS

THE SOURCE: "The Tech Intellectuals" by Henry Farrell, in *Democracy*, Fall 2013.

LIKE MARTINIS, EAMES CHAIRS, AND OTHER icons of midcentury America, public intellectuals are back. In the days when the characters portrayed in *Mad Men* strode the streets of New York, freelance thinkers such as Edmund Wilson and Mary McCarthy loomed large in public debates, drawing on the world of ideas to illuminate everything from the Cold

War to sex. But eventually their kind was absorbed into the expanding universities and smothered in campus insularity and obscurantism.

Today's public intellectuals are animated by one big issue, writes Henry Farrell, a political scientist at George Washington University: the reshaping of society by new communication technologies. For example, in *Here Comes Everybody* (2009), Clay Shirky explores how digital communications give us new freedom to organize everything from flash mobs to businesses. In *Where Good Ideas Come From* (2011), Steve Johnson



EPA / JEON HEON-KYUN / CORBIS

The new tech intellectuals thrive on speakers' fees at business conferences. Nicholas Carr, a critic of some technology trends, spoke at the Seoul Technology Forum in 2011.

celebrates what he sees as the collective, tech-enabled future of creativity. Other “technology intellectuals” include Rebecca MacKinnon, Ethan Zuckerman, and Nicholas Carr.

Farrell finds much to applaud in the writing of such thinkers, but much to criticize as well. Theirs is an ideologically narrow world, with a spectrum running from “hard libertarianism [to] moderate liberalism.” There are “few radical left-wingers, and fewer conservatives.” The tech intellectuals share “an open and friendly pragmatism,” but are prone to a kind of digital unreality, a “flavorless celebration of superficial diversity.” They faithfully reflect Silicon Valley’s skepticism toward government. Their work often “depicts a world of possibilities that seems starkly at odds with the American reality of skyrocketing political and economic inequality.”

The narrowness of the tech intellectuals’ vision isn’t an accident, Farrell believes. As their midcentury forebears were, they are able to sustain themselves outside the universities, but their world has its own limits. The vital currency of their realm is public attention. While earlier public intellectuals such as Dwight Macdonald and Daniel Bell held forth on the big issues of the day in little magazines such as *Partisan Review*

and *Dissent*, for their successors the brass ring is an invitation to give a TED talk, which pays nothing but provides an audience potentially in the millions. The tech intellectuals convert attention into dollars by writing books, winning fellowships and research grants, and, most lucratively, speaking on the business conference circuit, where fees can range from \$5,000 to \$45,000 or more. And it’s the tech industry and its employees who write many of the checks that make all these things possible.

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This insular ecosystem encourages tech intellectuals to “buff the rough patches from [their] presentation again and again, sanding it down to a beautifully polished surface, which all too often does no more than reflect [their] audience’s preconceptions back at them.” Farrell is particularly critical of Jeff Jarvis, author most recently of *What Would Google Do?* (2011), and cyberpessimist

Evgeny Morozov, both of whom he regards as cynical attention seekers. Jarvis's Google book, for example, is a name-dropping paean to the wonders wrought by the Internet giant, "not meant to introduce new insight so much as certify that the author occupies the role of the published guru."

There are "smart and wonderful" thinkers among the tech intellectuals—Farrell singles out Canadian programmer and writer Tom Slee as a serious thinker who punctures some of the tech world's fondest illusions—but there is not much intellectual diversity. For one thing, few writers question Silicon

Valley's comfortable assumptions about the connection between technology and economic inequality. While the Valley's denizens see their world as an egalitarian paradise for achievers and their products as tools of empowerment for the masses, their lavish stock options and capital gains are making the world a measurably more unequal place. Farrell adds that he sees a crying need to take a hard look at the "burgeoning relationship between technology companies and the U.S. government." That's not likely to happen until the debate is joined by thinkers who don't look to the tech industry for their daily bread. ■