Responsibility of Intellectuals

Allott, Nicholas, Knight, Chris, Smith, Neil, Chomsky, Noam

Published by University College London

Allott, Nicholas, et al.
Responsibility of Intellectuals: Reflections by Noam Chomsky and Others after 50 years.
University College London, 2019.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/81900.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/81900

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2778665
Introduction

Chomsky set out three responsibilities of intellectuals in his classic paper: to speak the truth and expose lies; to provide historical context; and to lift the veil of ideology, the underlying framework of ideas that limits the boundaries of debate.\(^1\)

As documented extensively in the press, there is ample evidence from Trump’s tweets in the US and the disinformation put about in the UK Brexit referendum that the incidence of lying on the part of the powerful has not decreased and the need to speak truth has not gone away. These examples might give the impression that there’s no need for intellectuals in general ‘to speak the truth and to expose lies’, as mainstream journalists will do it anyway. But in these cases there are powerful (indeed elite) forces on both sides, and it is generally only by the actions of individual intellectuals that the facts are revealed and discussed.

The archetypal example is Edward Snowden, an employee of the NSA (National Security Agency) who leaked vast numbers of classified documents to journalists, revealing the massive surveillance of its own citizens perpetrated by the US government. His action was condemned as treachery by some, lauded as heroic patriotism by others. Explaining what drove him to act as he did, Snowden said that ‘the breaking point was seeing the Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, directly lie under oath to Congress’.\(^2\) Chomsky commended Snowden’s behaviour, saying ‘he should be welcomed as a person who carried out the obligations of a citizen. He informed American citizens of what their government is doing to them. That’s exactly what a person who has real patriotism … would do.’\(^3\)
Clearly, the veil of ideology still hangs heavy and historical context is often lacking, as is evident from the current debate on what to do about North Korea or the ongoing problems in the Middle East. Sadly, Chomsky’s paper ‘The Responsibility of Intellectuals’ (hereafter RoI) is as relevant today as it was 50 years ago. Much, however, has changed in the intervening period, and it is worth exploring how these changes have affected – and perhaps subtly changed – the responsibilities of intellectuals.

At a minimum, there have been changes in the number, nature and status of intellectuals; the people to whom truth needs to be spoken; and what else is required if speaking truth and exposing lies is to have any impact. One is responsible for the foreseeable consequences of one’s actions; if there are no consequences, when should one persevere and when should one stop wasting one’s time and do something more effective? Moreover, technological advances have complicated the landscape. We explore each of these issues.

The number, nature and status of intellectuals

As Dwight Macdonald made clear in the articles from which Chomsky drew his inspiration, all people have a moral and political duty to speak truth to power but – as Chomsky emphasises – the combination of training, facilities, political liberty, access to information and freedom of expression enjoyed by some intellectuals imposes deeper responsibilities on them. While it may not always be obvious who counts as an intellectual for these purposes, what is clear is that the number of intellectuals has increased dramatically over the last 50 years, as exemplified in the UK by the huge expansion of university education over that period: from less than 10 per cent of the population to nearly 50 per cent. Disappointingly, only a minority of these new intellectuals see themselves as ‘value-oriented’ (in Chomsky’s more recent terminology). The contrast is between ‘technocratic and policy-oriented intellectuals’ (the ‘good guys’, in the eyes of the establishment, who merely serve external power) and the ‘value-oriented intellectuals’ (the ‘bad guys’, from an establishment perspective, who engage in critical analysis and ‘delegitimization’). This sardonic description characterises those who have a ‘moral responsibility as decent human beings … to advance the causes of freedom, justice, mercy, peace … [as opposed to] … the role they are expected to play, serving … leadership and established institutions’. Why the pernicious persistence of this distinction? There are many factors at play.
Intellectual courage

A significant factor in determining the preparedness of intellectuals to adopt a dissident stance is obviously fear of the consequences. As Craig Murray argues in his contribution to this book, the scope of academic freedom has declined significantly in the last few decades; universities are now expected to function as corporations, tenure is shrinking and funding has become short-term and dependent on continual measurement of research outputs, putting the funders in de facto academic and intellectual control.7

One concrete effect of this development can be seen in the casualisation of labour in academic life. The situation is worst for post-docs, who tend to get a sequence of short-term contracts with no career structure and little prospect of tenure.8 The attendant insecurity is a powerful disincentive to say or do anything that might rock the boat – or irritate the representatives of big business that increasingly populate university governing bodies.

The increasing emphasis by a dominant bureaucracy on ‘paper trails’ (in some institutions faculty are enjoined to keep a written record of every interaction with any student, as a defence against possible later litigation) may also remove time and inclination to engage, as well as having a stultifying effect on intellectual development – perhaps accounting in part for the unprecedented discontent among staff, as demonstrated in the February to April 2018 widespread strike action involving some 65 universities.

For one prominent class of intellectuals (viz. academics), these developments have undoubtedly led to changes in their status and their ability – or courage – to undertake the analysis required to ‘seek the truth lying hidden behind the veil of distortion and misrepresentation’. When one considers the situation of black intellectuals, then the issues, as Jackie Walker points out in her contribution, are all the more marked.9 When historical injustices against black people remain barely acknowledged, let alone commemorated, it is with trepidation that people of colour raise their heads above the parapet to speak truth to power on any issue, even those that relate to their own history and experience.

Intellectual confidence

Even among those willing to face the consequences, lack of confidence, combined with the sneaking suspicion that what they do is ineffectual,
discourages many from activism. It is interesting in this regard to contrast the paucity of ‘intellectuals’ in Chomsky’s recent sense with the rise in the number of academics willing to step into the public eye to popularise their own subject, or just their own work. Alan Lightman draws contrasts between three levels of intellectual: those who speak and write for the public exclusively about their own discipline; those who speak and write about their discipline and how it relates to the social, cultural and political world; and those who contribute ‘by invitation only’: intellectuals who have become elevated to symbols and are asked to write and speak about public issues not necessarily connected to their original field of expertise at all. The stock example is Einstein. Lightman then lists other people he would place in this category, beginning with Chomsky. Lightman’s taxonomy cross-cuts Chomsky’s, but his perception that a certain status should arise ‘by invitation only’ suggests that he has been seduced by the thought that speaking out on matters of public concern requires special authority. As Chomsky was at pains to point out, no special expertise or authority is required, and the responsibility to speak out rests with every one of us. It is not a matter of waiting to be invited, as this attitude encourages a kind of defeatism: if I’m not in the select group of ‘invitees’ what I do is irrelevant.

We have no easy solutions to the problems of intellectual courage and confidence, but the practical question of what can be done to encourage more people to do something – anything – on the kinds of issue featured in RoI is pressing.

The people to whom truth needs to be spoken

The responsibility of intellectuals is often summarised as ‘speaking truth to power’. But it needs emphasising that speaking truth to power may not be the highest priority. Even where it is, the powers to which truth needs to be spoken are perhaps more disparate than before.

Speaking truth to the powerless

Those in power are often fully aware of what they are doing and why they are doing it. This is a point Chomsky has made forcefully about people like Churchill, who is cited in RoI as saying ‘The government of the world must be entrusted to satisfied nations’. More generally, the elite need an accurate idea of what is going on in order to govern. Some of course may be (wilfully) ignorant, and it is necessary to speak
truth to such people so that they cannot claim not to know the truth. But arguably the most important priority is to speak truth to the powerless, and to make apparently powerless people aware that, in conjunction with others, they need not remain powerless. David Hume recognised this in his 1741 maxim that ‘power is in the hands of the governed’.11 The first requirement, then, is to make such people aware of the true situation and hence of the possibility of their helping to bring about change.

Filling the gaps

Equally important is the fact that the responsibility to speak the truth has many facets: it is frequently not merely about exposing lies but about filling the gaps left, through calculation or inadvertence, by the mainstream media and the government agencies that feed them.12 After the surprise result of the Brexit referendum it was striking that in her letter triggering the UK’s actual departure the Prime Minister Theresa May made no mention of vexatious problems such as the status of Gibraltar, the fate of the fishing industry, the future of farmers and so on. It is impossible to cover every difficulty, but omissions give as clear an indication of policy priorities as do commitments. Similarly, in the 77-page government white paper (Cm 9417 – The United Kingdom’s exit from and new partnership with the European Union) there is no mention of equalities or ‘inequalities’, such as the status of women. The problem of validity that these omissions raise is summed up in Sophie Chappell’s aptly entitled paper ‘Political deliberation under conditions of deception: The case of Brexit’.13

There are nonetheless some powers to whom it is necessary to speak the truth and, just as there have been changes in the nature of intellectuals, there have been changes in the powers to which truth needs to be spoken and the lies of which need to be exposed. RoI dealt almost exclusively with governments, but one needs now increasingly to look at companies and other non-state actors such as the public relations industry and the business community more generally, the National Rifle Association (NRA)14 or Breitbart News.

With non-state actors, it is worth asking whether the nature of the responsibilities of intellectuals changes slightly. A significant omission from RoI is the contrary of exposing lies: applauding truth-telling or the defence of human rights. The effectiveness of speaking truth to governments is dubious, and praising them is generally irrelevant. Is either activity more efficacious when confronting corporate power?
Speaking truth to business

Despite the rise of fair trade initiatives, the single motivating factor for most companies remains profit, and companies are increasingly exploiting ‘Strategic Lawsuits against Public Participation’ (SLAPPs)\textsuperscript{15} to inhibit intellectuals and organisations from campaigning against them. As a result, confronting business requires some changes in tactics. The Business and Human Rights Resource Centre (BHRRC)\textsuperscript{16} provides useful examples and evidence, and there are some clear indicators of the effectiveness of both positive praise and negative criticism. Consider two examples: Uber and Penzeys Spices.

Both cases concerned the association of companies with (or against) the policies of US President Trump. In his campaign for the American presidency, Trump exhibited systematic Islamophobia, on one typical occasion issuing a statement demanding ‘a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States’.\textsuperscript{17} Soon after taking office he issued an executive order banning all refugees and people arriving from seven Muslim-majority countries (Chad, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Syria and Yemen). The order was challenged in the courts, a revised version was issued (with Iraq omitted), and further modifications were made until the Supreme Court ruled in the President's favour. The (attempted) ban polarised the nation, with one significant side-effect being a strike by New York taxi drivers (many of whom are Muslims). An advertisement by Uber (a peer-to-peer ride-sharing company) that they were still ‘open for business’ was widely interpreted as an attempt to undermine the taxi drivers’ strike action, and led to the social media campaign #DeleteUber, resulting in 200,000 people deleting their Uber accounts within days.\textsuperscript{18} This is a good example of negative criticism of a business for its human rights stance having a significant (even if temporary) effect.

The converse situation is illustrated by the case of Penzeys Spice Company. The CEO attacked Trump’s racist position on immigration in the company newsletter. This provoked a storm of heated reactions but, overall, had a huge (positive) impact on business.\textsuperscript{19} Even if this was mainly rewarding ‘anti-Trump’ behaviour rather than pro-human rights behaviour, the strategy clearly influenced consumers, as witness headlines in the press such as ‘CEO Bill Penzey Jr. is learning firsthand how blasting President Donald Trump is good for his bottom line’. Here admiration for a company’s stance had a positive impact on its commercial performance.\textsuperscript{20}

It is significant that hostility to Trump was crucial in determining the outcome of both examples and it would be foolish to draw too strong
a conclusion; nevertheless, it is worth considering whether, at least in the case of businesses, there is a responsibility not just to expose lies but publicly to applaud those who take a positive stand.

**Evidence for the effectiveness of activism?**

There is a more general lesson about potential change to be learned from such examples. Chomsky has frequently spoken of improvements over time in the civic situation. In a conversation with Harry Belafonte he reports ‘tremendous progress’, saying that ‘the country has become much more civilized in the last 50 or 60 years’, citing women’s rights, civil rights more generally, gay rights, environmental concerns, opposition to aggression, and so on. If such historical evaluation is accurate it suggests that activist pressure can lead to change, providing some minimal grounds for optimism. Chomsky’s own optimism is part of a deliberate strategy. He has often quoted Gramsci’s aphorism ‘you should have pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will’. Only the latter, Chomsky writes, protects you from the despair engendered by Trump’s policies on the environment, described as a ‘death knell for the human species’.

**Disseminating the truth**

Value-oriented intellectuals wishing to speak the truth have greater difficulty than before in doing so in a way that can have any impact. There are several different issues at play.

**Relativist views of truth**

Since Chomsky wrote RoI there has been a rise within the academy of a kind of post-modernist relativism that questions whether there is an objective truth to be spoken (to power or otherwise), holding instead that different truths obtain for different groups. There are good reasons to reject post-modernist relativism (see e.g. the books on the subject by the philosophers Thomas Nagel and Paul Boghossian), as Chomsky himself clearly does (as demonstrated in the 1971 debate between Chomsky and Foucault). However its influence – and potentially its contribution to the current ‘post truth’ environment – cannot be ignored. While many who hold such views appear to be motivated (at least in
part) by a desire to ‘protect oppressed cultures from the charge of holding false or unjustified views’, as Boghossian puts it, such relativism is likely to inhibit criticism where criticism is due (e.g. the treatment of women in many Islamic states, or autocratic practices in non-western cultures). Moreover, it risks leaving the powerful immune to criticism: if the powerful can’t criticise the oppressed – because different truths apply to them – presumably the oppressed can’t criticise the powerful for the same reason. It is hard to gauge the significance of relativist views in this context but they may well have left some intellectuals disinclined to speak out and blunted the influence of those who have.

Such relativist views have plausibly also contributed to the rise of identity politics and the ‘political correctness’ that often accompanies them – including a disturbing increase in calls for ‘no-platforming’ at events held within academic institutions. While it is undoubtedly true that charges of political correctness have often been used by those on the political right to divert attention from discriminatory behaviour against disadvantaged groups by mocking left-wing concerns with the language used and the impact on oppressed groups, it is also true that many of the left’s behaviours have been counter-productive and have facilitated a rise in ‘right-wing political correctness’ which, as Paul Krugman pointed out, ‘unlike the liberal version – has lots of power and money behind it. And the goal is very much the kind of thing Orwell tried to convey with his notion of Newspeak: to make it impossible to talk, and possibly even think, about ideas that challenge the established order.’

Anti-intellectualism and distrust of experts

Even where intellectuals are prepared to speak out, the rise of anti-intellectualism makes it difficult for them to be heard. As discussed above, Chomsky often emphasises the ways in which the ‘political sciences’ are used to obfuscate discussion and suggest that issues need to be left to ‘the experts’, pointing out that ‘the cult of the experts is both self-serving, for those who propound it, and fraudulent’. However, as Nichols has forcefully discussed, there is danger in embracing ‘misguided intellectual egalitarianism’. ‘Stubborn ignorance’ may result in countless deaths, as with the anti-vaccine campaign, or in unexpected and unwanted electoral results. Nichols cites Michael Gove’s interventions in the UK Brexit campaign and Donald Trump’s success in the American presidential election.

One interesting development over the past 50 years is that with many of the issues most critical for human survival (e.g. climate change,
nuclear proliferation, genetic engineering) the underlying moral and political issues are no more in need of ‘expertise’ than before. But there is now a ‘hard science’ dimension to understanding the issues and the options and a genuine need for people to understand some of the science. This has led to a situation where, deliberately or not, ‘hard scientists’ and not just ‘political scientists’ may use their expertise to exclude the general population from decision-making.

Take genetic engineering as an example. In evaluating whether to release a genetically modified organism it is obviously important to understand the science and the ‘technical’ risks in play. But it is also important to come back to the politics and economics as well. Many of those who oppose GM food, for example, do so not because they misunderstand the science but because they have concerns over the economics (where for example agribusinesses will hold patents over the GM seeds) or wider concerns over the political appropriateness of a technological solution at all. A more appropriate way of addressing the issue, one that leaves those most affected with control over their lives, might involve campaigning against the use of famine as a political tool, or working to eliminate waste in the supply chain.

Where Chomsky pointed to the fact that (policy) intellectuals liked their status as ‘technical experts’, there is a risk that hard scientists like their role in proposing technological solutions where these may not be what is politically or socially appropriate. The role of intellectuals in disentangling all this is more complicated now that it is not just a matter of seeing through the absurdities of political science but of patiently explaining the science one does need to know and its relevance to the moral and political issues. Intellectuals then need to show how those issues remain ones on which everyone (not just the experts) legitimately has an opinion and a responsibility to act. Large swathes of the population, including in particular those who voted for Trump, and those influenced by Michael Gove in the UK, now distrust so-called ‘experts’, including in particular scientific experts. As Gove (then Secretary of State for Justice, one of several cabinet portfolios he has held) put it: ‘the people of this country have had enough of experts from organizations with acronyms saying that they know what is best’. The root of the problem is then confusion (possibly created deliberately by politicians) about the role of experts and of scientific evidence in setting policy. It is only ‘intellectuals’ who can stand up for science while for many non-intellectuals science itself has fallen into disrepute. The upshot is that distrust of experts and the anti-intellectualism that accompanies it is making it harder for intellectuals to make the truth accessible to the
powerless (because they won’t listen to them) and may make it easier for the powerful to dismiss what they say when they speak truth to power.

The issues become more complex when the genetic engineering pertains to humans and the elimination of disease. It may seem apodictic that preventing Down syndrome or autism in the population is desirable, and that if that aim can be fulfilled there should be no disagreement about the morality of using genetic engineering to effect that goal. But the possibility of eliminating such conditions may be incompatible with maintaining due respect for people who have them. Many (high-functioning) autists consider autism to be not a disability but a difference to be celebrated. In that situation does the medical profession have the right to intervene? The same problem exists with greater clarity when it comes to eliminating deafness, as the Deaf community (with a capital D rather than lower-case d) is suspicious of or hostile to any such ‘progress’. There is no obviously correct answer here, but the history of eugenics indicates both that the issue is not quite as new as it might appear and, more importantly, the necessity for scrupulous respect for the scientific truth and the need to expose misrepresentation.

Social media

There have been radical changes in the outlets for disseminating information, whether true or false. On the one hand, there is ever greater corporate control of the media, which makes it harder for value-oriented intellectuals to find a mainstream platform; on the other hand, there is the rise of the internet and the dramatic increase in the influence of social media, which at least have the potential to provide platforms outside corporate control. Social media in particular can raise public awareness quickly, give a voice to the excluded, facilitate the persuasive impact of word of mouth, communicate a sense of urgency, allow safe communication under oppressive regimes and allow a sense of individual engagement and identification with an issue or a movement. Despite this potential, the reality seems to be that for many people sources of news and opinion are getting narrower, with individuals retreating inside social media ‘bubbles’ where they are only fed news that reinforces their (establishment-influenced) beliefs and where the structure of news channels (tweets, Facebook feeds, etc.), with their emphasis on brevity, makes stepping outside the presuppositions of debate ever harder and providing historical context almost impossible.

An important aspect of the rise of social media is the difficulty of knowing what lies are being propagated. Social media feeds can be
targeted so finely it is hard to know what is being said to whom – lies are no longer always ‘public’, and you can’t expose and correct what you don’t know is being said: ‘if you aren’t a member of the community being served the lies, you’re quite likely never to know that they are in circulation’, as John Lanchester remarked in a chilling analysis of the pernicious effect of Facebook: ‘in essence an advertising company which is indifferent to the content on its site’.39

Fake news

This issue is made more pressing by the vast increase in the number of ideologically motivated organisations deliberately promulgating what can only be termed ‘fake news’. This issue is insightfully dissected in Eric Alterman’s essay on think tanks.40 Here the appropriate conclusion to draw is perhaps that the rise of fake news and of ideologically motivated think tanks really point up a responsibility on intellectuals not so much to ‘lift the veil of ideology’ as to teach people how to do this for themselves by showing them how to analyse and question the sources of news. As he says in the same paper, ‘The basis of democracy is not information but conversation’.

A further corollary of these developments is that speaking truth is not enough: you need to take steps to ensure that others hear the truth and can disentangle it from the sea of disinformation flooding the web. What do intellectuals now have to do to get the truth across and ensure that the general public (or the educated general public, or whoever the intended audience is) have some exposure to it? Are new responsibilities emerging not just to speak truth but to do so in particular ways, such as through social media, or particular channels, such as WikiTribune?

Making the truth actionable

Quoting Daniel Bell’s The End of Ideology, Chomsky talks in RoI of ‘the conversion of ideas into social levers’.41 If we take our responsibilities seriously we must talk sufficiently persuasively that those who hear us take action. As Nicholas Allott stresses in his contribution to this volume, this is not a simple thing to do. One problematic finding – the ‘backfire’ effect – is that facts that contradict political beliefs tend to reinforce rather than dispel those beliefs: we treat these facts with suspicion, while uncritically welcoming evidence that confirms our current view.42 Shamefully, the same applies even in academe. A further problem is
that action is frequently not driven by evaluation of the consequences, as witness voting behaviour, which is typically neither a matter of selecting a party with policies that match preferences nor of rewarding or punishing incumbents for their actions. Voting patterns are strongly affected by natural events: incumbents have been punished for bad weather and shark attacks.\textsuperscript{43} So simply exposing facts is radically insufficient: we have at a minimum a responsibility to tell the truth in ways that make it likely to be grasped and acted upon. In a nutshell, intellectuals have a responsibility to ensure that the truth is accessible not just to other intellectuals but to the population at large.

In many areas where some progress is undeniable, economic class still impacts hugely upon the practical enjoyment of civil and political rights. The interest that western intellectuals have had in speaking truth to power has been greatest where it has influenced their own rights as opposed to those of an economic or political underclass. A simple but topical example is the systematic distortion of debate around UK housing policy, where many intellectuals are happy to bemoan the lack of supply, which directly disadvantages them, but fewer discuss the changes to the benefit system and the powers of local authorities which have disenfranchised the poor; still less how the situation could be improved.\textsuperscript{44}

Even-handed exposure of the truth as it affects all in society may not be sufficient. With many issues (climate change, migration, inequality) it is probable that significant numbers of people know the truth – but are unwilling to make the sacrifices required to rectify the situation.\textsuperscript{45} To what extent do intellectuals have a responsibility to come up with solutions that show people how they can do the right thing without making sacrifices they’re just not prepared to make? Alternatively, to what extent do intellectuals have a responsibility to demonstrate by example that making the sacrifices is not as impossible as it seems and still leaves one with a worthwhile existence?

More challenging is how to determine what responsibilities intellectuals face when speaking truth to power is insufficient and one needs to change the \textit{structures} of power. Consider the case of women’s rights and the associated issue of women’s power in society. If we restrict attention to western Europe and north America, there has clearly been considerable progress, but it is significant that we still need to talk about women ‘breaking through the glass ceiling’. In a perceptive essay, Mary Beard observes that our ‘cultural template for a powerful person remains resolutely male’, talking of how this template ‘works to disempower women’ and noting that ‘You can’t easily fit women into a structure that is already coded as male; you have to change the
structure’. How far beyond merely pointing out these truths do an intellectual’s responsibilities go?

As these examples make obvious, an element of activism is required over and above just speaking the truth, if that truth is to be actionable. Activism can take many forms, ranging from monumental linked movements exemplified by the ‘Arab Spring’ or ‘Black Lives Matter’ to individual acts of raising awareness. Activism is often most powerful when it includes an element of demonstrating the art of the possible. It need not be focused on global issues to be valuable – innumerable issues are worth supporting and defending. To take one small example, consider Heineken’s WOBO – the brewer’s ‘World Bottle’. On a visit to the Caribbean, the brewing magnate Alfred Heineken identified two problems: bottles littering the beaches and a serious lack of building materials. He proposed solving both problems by inventing a bottle that could function as a brick. Sadly, the idea was a ‘failure’ in that it never took off; but it is an example of what individuals can do – and arguably intellectuals must now do. In his *Requiem for the American Dream*, Chomsky emphasises that ‘activists are the people who have created the rights that we enjoy’, and ends the book with Howard Zinn’s words ‘what matters is the countless small deeds of unknown people, who lay the basis for the significant events that enter history’.

**Broader issues**

In RoI, Chomsky focused on the responsibility of individual intellectuals to speak the truth and expose lies. But if they are to be able to do that in a way that has an impact, there are perhaps prior responsibilities that need exploring.

‘Civic space’ and the infringement of liberties

Above we touched on changes to the academic environment that may discourage at least one set of intellectuals from speaking out. But there are much broader changes at play as well. ‘Civic space’ is the set of conditions that enable citizens to organise, participate and communicate without hindrance. Civic space is only secure when a state protects its citizens and ‘respects and facilitates their fundamental rights to associate, assemble peacefully and freely express views and opinions’.

As the organisation Civicus demonstrates, there is ample evidence that civic space is under attack around the world, and that vulnerable
groups are discouraged from speaking out, often under the pretext that this is a necessary part of the counter-terrorism agenda. To take a simple example, as part of its attempt to stop ‘radicalisation’, the UK government instituted the ‘Prevent’ strategy. Among other measures this provision requires that social services, faith leaders, teachers, doctors and others refer those at risk of radicalisation to a local Prevent body, which then decides what to do. Among the signs that someone may warrant referral is ‘having a sense of grievance that is triggered by personal experience of racism or discrimination or aspects of government policy’.

The Civicus Monitor goes on to point out how developments in the UK mirror more draconian actions elsewhere, making the obvious but helpful point that it is important for governments in the global north to practise what they preach if they are to have any credibility when criticising the actions of governments in the global south.

This suggests that there is a new responsibility on intellectuals: to defend the civic space that makes possible the exercise of the responsibilities outlined in RoI, and to show solidarity with those human rights defenders globally trying to do the same.

Liberty

The changes in the powers of the UK government touched on above reflect ideologically motivated infringement of liberties more generally. This can be illustrated with a motion brought at the 2017 annual general meeting of the civil liberties and human rights charity Liberty, attacking aspects of the UK government’s regressive legislation:

This AGM condemns the use of discrimination and destitution as public policy tools to discourage migration. This AGM resolves to fight to dismantle this deeply unethical strategy including campaigning against:

The requirement on schools to collect nationality and country of birth data on children;

Home Office agreements with the Department for Education and the NHS regarding data sharing for immigration purposes;

The requirement on landlords to check tenants’ rights to reside in the UK and associated penalties;

The requirement on banks and healthcare providers to check residency rights;
The new criminal offences of ‘driving while illegal’ and ‘working while illegal’; and ... that no human being is ‘illegal’, such a concept is totally unacceptable.

The need for such a set of proposals is a harsh indictment of current ideology, where ‘ideology’ is described by Bell,54 in terms that Chomsky endorses, as ‘a mask for class interest’. The issue should serve as a rallying call for responsible intellectuals whose ‘role in the creation and analysis of ideology’ should be ‘our basic concern’.55

Global domains

Individual intellectuals have a responsibility ‘to speak the truth and to expose lies’, and we have suggested above that they must undertake an element of activism if this is to have any impact. However, it is characteristic of many of the issues most critical for human survival (e.g. climate change) that they quite clearly need a global response, including from countries such as China that are not western democracies. While Chomsky’s usual strictures about being responsible for the actions of one’s own country and the emptiness of attacking the actions of other countries still apply, it remains true that genuine progress on these issues will require international collaboration. Intellectuals, especially those with international networks, such as most academics, plausibly have a responsibility to foster such collaboration and to ensure that the truth they speak is accessible not just locally but globally. Chomsky’s own practice provides some clues as to what this might involve. He not only talks and writes fanatically hard (with a great deal of his work accessible on the internet), he has visited Turkey to support Fatih Tas; he went to Nicaragua to show solidarity with the Sandinistas; he went to North Vietnam to provide less biased reportage on the situation there;56 the list is almost endless. He is a paradigmatic example of an intellectual who has confronted the emerging responsibility to do more to spread the word and support activism on a global scale. Supporting the networks that make global action possible is perhaps another new responsibility for the value-oriented intellectual.

Conclusion

By exploring some of the developments that have occurred over the last 50 years we have reinforced the conclusion that the responsibilities of
intellectuals that Chomsky set out in his paper still have their original force. There have been subtle changes concerning the ways in which speaking the truth and exposing lies have got harder. But public awareness of the needs is also greater, leaving room for modest optimism.

When he wrote RoI, Chomsky recognised that the responsibilities he discussed were just the start. As he wrote in response to a letter from George Steiner:

I do feel that the crucial question, unanswered in the article, is what the next paragraph should say. I’ve thought a good deal about this, without having reached any satisfying conclusions. I’ve tried various things – harassing congressmen, ‘lobbying’ in Washington, lecturing at town forums, working with student groups in preparation of public protests, demonstrations, teach-ins, and so on, in all of the ways that many others have adopted as well. The only respect in which I have personally gone any further is in refusal to pay half of my income tax … My own feeling is that one should refuse to participate in any activity that implements American aggression – thus tax refusal, draft refusal, avoidance of work that can be used by the agencies of militarism and repression, all seem to me essential. I can’t suggest a general formula. Detailed decisions have to be matters of personal judgement and conscience. I feel uncomfortable about suggesting draft refusal publicly, since it is a rather cheap proposal from someone of my age. But I think that tax refusal is an important gesture, both because it symbolizes a refusal to make a voluntary contribution to the war machine and also because it indicates a willingness, which should, I think, be indicated, to take illegal measures to oppose an indecent government.57

Now, 50 years on, the need for all of us to examine our consciences and decide ‘What have I done?’ and ‘What can I do?’ has never been greater.

Notes

1 We are grateful to Nicholas Allott and two anonymous reviewers for perceptive comments on an earlier version.
3 Noam Chomsky, ‘Chomsky on Snowden & why NSA surveillance doesn’t stop terror while the U.S. drone war creates it,’ interview by Amy Goodman, Democracy Now, 3 March 2015,


8 According to Waseem Yaqoob in the London Review of Books, ’figures from 2016 showed that 75,000 UK university staff were on highly casualised contracts, and 21,000 on zero hours’. Waseem Yaqoob, ’Why we strike,’ London Review of Books, 16 February 2018.

9 Walker’s contribution in Chapter 2. Of equal importance to ethnicity is the question of class. (For some relevant discussion see Owen Jones, Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class (London: Verso, 2011).)


11 Cited in Chomsky, Requiem for the American Dream (2017), 123. Elsewhere, when Chomsky mentions Hume’s paradox, he suggests that Hume may have been too sanguine about the power relations involved. See Neil Smith and Nicholas Allott, Chomsky: Ideas and Ideals, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 314–5.

12 For an analysis of Chomsky’s own ‘technique of dissection’ see Smith and Allott, Chomsky (2016), 321 ff.


14 The NRA describes itself, somewhat to our surprise, as ‘the oldest continuously operating civil rights organization in the United States’ (our emphasis). This claim was once generally accepted but is now treated with some scepticism: see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Rifle_Association (accessed 4 November 2018). It is significant that the cause of the scepticism is that other civil rights organisations pre-dated the NRA.

15 For a number of examples, see The Corporate Legal Accountability Quarterly Bulletin (BHRRRC, September 2017): 24.


20 We are grateful to Mauricio Lazala, Gregory Regaignon and Marti Flacks of the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre for helpful discussion of these examples.


The case against such questioning of the existence of objective truth is succinctly put in Smith and Allott, Chomsky (2016), 268: 'The claim that all argument is subjective can itself be subjected to critical (rational) analysis. If it is an objective claim it is contradictory; it would be false if true. If it is a subjective claim then, by hypothesis, it cannot exclude the objective claim that it is false. On either interpretation the thesis is self-defeating.'

Thomas Nagel, The Last Word (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Paul Boghossian, Fear of Knowledge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) (we are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for drawing this book to our attention); on the Chomsky/Foucault debate see Peter Wilkin, Noam Chomsky: On Power, Knowledge and Human Nature (London: Macmillan Press, 1997), 77 ff. Video and a transcript of the debate are easily found online.

Boghossian, Fear of Knowledge, 130.


Tom Nichols, The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). There is a long history of anti-intellectualism on both sides of the political spectrum. On the right, it goes back at least to the counter-enlightenment (Berlin, 1973). Crudely, the wellspring seems always to have been that the ideas promoted by the ‘intellectuals’ would pose a challenge to traditional forms of authority and political organisation. Perhaps for this reason, the intellectuals who have most often been the target have been teachers and academics. This tradition plausibly lies behind some of the distrust of experts expressed by people like Michael Gove. If one looks at the political left, there is also a long history of anti-intellectual distrust of experts, though primarily from a feeling that the experts try to speak for the people, instead of letting them speak for themselves – inevitably getting it wrong in the process. As a result, the left-wing distrust of experts has been focused on ‘political’ experts. Arguably, the two traditions have now coalesced into a general distrust of experts, as amply illustrated by the examples in Nichols’ The Death of Expertise (2016). One aspect of the recent rise of anti-intellectualism that hasn’t received the attention it deserves is the possible link to a corporate agenda. As Chomsky has frequently emphasised, corporations benefit politically from a passive and disengaged populace (leaving corporate lobbyists free to pull the strings), and anything that rubbishes critical thought and the pronouncements of intellectuals is likely to find favour with them. The connections between anti-intellectualism and corporate think tanks merit further study.


He cites Nichols, The Death of Expertise (2016), 209–10, the same quotation as we do below.

While many of the targets Nichols attacks deserve his condemnation, it is striking that his own scholarship is unreliable. Apart from the presumption that his own expertise is genuine and reliable, with a depth not accessible to the interested layman, he attacks Chomsky for his ‘lack of credentials’ and being ‘no more an expert in foreign policy than, say, the late George Kennan was in the origins of human language’ (44). Needless to say, there are no citations of any of Chomsky’s ‘stack of books on politics and foreign policy’, not a single example of anything Chomsky having written or said being incorrect or misleading, nor any engagement with Chomsky’s claim that pretensions of expertise in ‘political science’ are largely fraudulent.


The convention in deaf studies is to use ‘Deaf’ for members of the Deaf community and ‘deaf’ to describe people who happen to be audiologically deaf. See for example Gary Morgan and
Bencie Woll, *Directions in Sign Language Acquisition* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 2002), xx. As approximately 90 per cent of deaf children are born to hearing parents and may have no exposure to usable language for months or years, many deaf people are not members of the Deaf community. Similarly, hearing people with deaf/Deaf parents can become part of the Deaf community.


For a sustained meditation on inequality, see Chomsky, *Requiem for the American Dream* (2017), 148.


Founded by three women – Patrice Cullors, Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi – whose names are not usually reported.


The 2017 AGM can be found at https://www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/sites/default/files/Resolutions%20of%20the%20AGM%202017.pdf (accessed 4 November 2018).


