



Prophets, Gurus, and Pundits: Rhetorical Styles and Public Engagement

Anna M. Young

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In *Prophets, Gurus, and Pundits*, author Anna M. Young proposes that the difficulty of bridging the gap between intellectuals and the public is not a failure of ideas; rather, it is an issue of rhetorical strategy. By laying a rhetorical foundation and presenting analytical case studies of contemporary “public intellectuals,” Young creates a training manual for intellectuals who seek to connect with a public audience and effect change writ large.

Young begins by defining key aspects of rhetorical style before moving on to discuss the specific ways in which intellectuals may present ideas to a general audience in order to tackle large-scale social problems. Next, she defines the ways in which five crucial turning points in our nation—the rise of religious fundamentalism, a growing lack of trust in our institutions, the continued destruction of the environment, the ubiquity of media and information in our daily lives, and the decline of evidence-based reasoning—have set the stage for opportunities in the current public-intellectual dialogue.

Via case studies of such well-known personalities as Deepak Chopra and Professor Cornel West, Young goes on to reveal the six types of public intellectuals who achieve success in presenting scholarly ideas to audiences at large:

The Prophet presents the public’s sins for contemplation, then offers a path to redemption.

The Guru shepherds his or her flock to enlightenment and a higher power.

The Sustainer draws upon our natural and human resources to proffer solutions for social, political, and ecological systems.

The Pundit utilizes wit and brevity to bring crucial issues to the attention of the public.

The Narrator combines a variety of perspectives to create a story the average person can connect with and understand.

The Scientist taps into the dreams of the public to offer ideas from above and beyond the typical scope of public discourse.

At once a rallying cry and roadmap, *The Politics of Thinking Out Loud* draws upon rhetorical expertise and analysis of contemporary public intellectuals to offer a model for scholars to effectively engage the public—and in doing so, perhaps forever change the world in which we live.

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