Did you know that in 2001 Cornel West, one of the foremost American public intellectuals (with an over $10,000 USD speaker fee), released a rap CD called *Sketches of My Culture*?

Professor West’s venture into Hip Hop did not sell many units. In fact, it mostly resulted in a standoff between him and then-president of Harvard University, Larry Summers, who wanted to fire him from Harvard for not being “professorial” enough.

But perhaps Professor West was only ahead of his time, because the design of the “21st century public intellectual” requires a Twitter account, a TEDx talk, and fluency in the language of Hip Hop.

This week, I lay out my arguments for the un-design of the 20th century public intellectual and introduce my DAnthro Rap song and video, which represents in form and process what I consider to be the essence of a 21st century public intellectual.

What are public intellectuals? The Australian Public Intellectual Network describes them as:

*People who spend a great deal of their time thinking hard about issues and who make those thoughts accessible in a way that is, broadly speaking, for the public good.*

In the MIT Communications Forum, scientist Alan Lightman provides two definitions of a public intellectual, one from Ralph Waldo Emerson and the other from Edward Said.

In summation of his and the API Network’s definitions, the values that the public intellectual represents are intelligence (i.e. as a thinking person knowledgeable about the past but also with new ideas), social engagement, and the ability to communicate one’s ideas to the widest range of people. It is the last aspect that
opens the opportunity for the redesign of the 21st century public intellectual.

The key considerations in the redesign of the public intellectual are the media of communication and the definition of the range of people.

For the 20th century public intellectual, the media focus has often been on:
1. publishing essays and/or columns in prestigious newspapers, both print and digital
2. writing lay audience books, and
3. appearing as commentators on radio and television.

The range of people that were sought to reach is probably very similar to the Conversation’s audience in terms of education (90% undergraduate degree or higher), income (53% making over $100K AUD), and professional class.

According to the API Network’s list of the top 40 Australian Public Intellectuals, Robert Manne is the foremost public intellectual in Australia.

According to his brief profile, he epitomises the 20th century public intellectual with his published award winning essays, columns for Murdoch Press and Fairfax, editorship of The Monthly, and regular commentary on ABC Radio. Lightman describes the third level of the public intellectual as “by invitation only.” The media that Robert Manne uses, as a 20th century public intellectual, often requires an invitation to participate.

Through the relative democratisation of the Internet, the 21st century public intellectual does not require an invitation to participate in the public arena. Her focus is on:
1. publishing a viral hit on Twitter
2. creating digitally mediated experiences that go viral on YouTube, Instagram, etc., and
3. appearing in a local TEDx event.

Why does she have a different focus? The range of people with whom she seeks to communicate is much broader than that of the 20th century public intellectual. She seeks to communicate not just to the educated, affluent, and professional classes, but also the other 98% of the world, or at least those who have access to social media.

Dori’s Tweeter Page. Image Source: Screengrab of Dori’s Twitter Page

The 21st century public intellectual knows, via the Global Web Index, that Twitter now reaches 21% of the global Internet population. According to a 2012 Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project survey, Twitter attracts more racially diverse participants than other social media services besides Instagram. An invitation is not required. She just sets up an account and by following people, she gets followed. She does not even require many followers. She knows how to tag a Tweet in such a way that it shows up in the Tweet-stream of those who do have large followings.

While writing books is important to the academy, there is discussion in the publishing world of the global decline in book sales. It is debatable whether people are reading less, but it is clearer that they are consuming and sharing more pictures and videos through YouTube, Snapchat, and Instagram, and other social media platforms. If the 21st century public intellectual wants to reach a wide range of people, her message needs to be packaged with strong visuals.

Hip Hop is especially pertinent as a vehicle of communication if she wants to reach a wide range of people, especially youth.

In the edited book Global Noise, UTS academic and hip hop expert Tony Mitchell argues that rap and Hip Hop have “become a vehicle for global youth affiliations and a tool for reworking local identities all over the world.” Thus, a Hip Hop music video posted to YouTube and Sina Weibo might be a more appropriate medium to communicate ideas to people all over the world, which is what my DAnthro Rap video is meant to do.
I wrote, recorded, choreographed, filmed and edited the DAnthro Rap video over my summer break because I wanted a way to communicate what I do to my young nieces and nephews in the USA, my followers on Weibo in China, and hopefully, virally to a wide range of people all over the world. Hip Hop is also a natural language for me, probably more so than academic discourse, because of it was part of my adolescent soundtrack. Drawing from Hip Hop’s global ubiquity, the DAnthro Rap song recounts the history of Design Anthropology and describes my own critical brand of DAnthro.

If you want to follow the process of the rap song and video’s making, one can do so as well.

Making of the DAnthro Rap on YouTube.

The freedom of being a 21st century public intellectual is that you do not have to wait for an invitation. This is especially important for those who due to their gender, race/ethnicity, class position, or lack of access to elite institutions would not likely receive one from the kinds of institutions that support the 20th century public intellectual. The responsibility of being a 21st century public intellectual is the same as that of being a 20th century one. One must ensure the communication of significant ideas about social issues, not just self-promotion. There lies the rub.

TEDx exists for the 21st century public intellectual who still seeks an invitation to something. Yet she is most likely just hoping that the video of the TEDx Talk goes viral on Twitter to reach her real target audience—the entire world.