

RIGHT-WING POPULISM, INFORMATION, AND KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract

'New media' information technologies were recently thought to be so intrinsically different from 'old,' mass media, technologies that fascism would no longer be possible. Through new media information and communication technologies, the political 'mass' was supposedly replaced by the 'crowd' or the 'swarm,' and an old mass media replaced by a new media serving individual 'information needs.' However, extreme right-wing political populism and encroaching fascism today are world-wide phenomena in developed countries, not only despite new media, but partly because of it. How is this possible?

Keywords: new media information. right-wing populism. fascism. democracy

Populismo de direita, informação e conhecimento

Resumo

Recentemente, pensava-se que as tecnologias de informação das "novas mídias" eram tão intrinsecamente diferentes das "velhas" *mass media* tecnologias que o fascismo não seria mais possível. Através de novas tecnologias de informação e comunicação, a 'massa' política foi supostamente substituída pela 'multidão' ou 'enxame', e uma velha *mass media* substituída por uma nova mídia servindo as 'necessidades de informação' individuais. populismo político e invasão do fascismo hoje são fenômenos mundiais nos países desenvolvidos, não apenas apesar das novas mídias, mas em parte por causa disso. Como isso é possível?

Palavras-chave: informação da nova mídia. populismo de direita. facismo. democracia

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I

Right-wing populist and fascist politics aren't hard to recognize. They are recognized by the political use of popular prejudices in order to address mass discontent, especially during periods of economic inequality or periods when people are fearful for other reasons. Large numbers of people resent the security that others have and they are left out of. But since the political state doesn't allow violence against itself or against the class of wealth that supports it, this resentment is then detoured toward others of even lower status or of outside status. Right-wing populism harnessing popular prejudice through leadership and media control is the means through which this detour is accomplished, and when these mechanisms of a party take control of the state, particularly through the security apparatuses, then fascism has been achieved. These political movements, however, start and run throughout as culturally based political movements, based in belief and mystification. For this reason, they remain resilient to knowledge and fact. They breed not only in a society of insecurity, but in the wake of the breakdown of public education and the public's suspicion of science and scholarship.

For example, in the United States, the contemporary political shift toward the right began with the beginnings of modern neo-liberalism and President Reagan's attacks upon the social and political movements of the late 1960s and 1970s. It continued with President Clinton's attack on the social support mechanism of welfare (demonizing poor women and women of color), and then continued into, eventually, President Trump's attacks on women, people of color, and immigrants. During this period, both the Democratic and Republican parties have moved further and further to the right, until the right has controlled nearly the whole of the allowed political spectrum.

In the United States during the past forty years, the drift of the entire establishment political spectrum further and further into contemporary neo-liberalism, along with the blockage of any possibility of populist left reform by both parties, have so far led to right-wing populism as being the only acceptable populist movement for much of the governing class. As long as far-right populism doesn't negatively affect the concentration of wealth, the elite 'conservative' class is happy to have it rule. Right-wing populism doesn't come from movements on the political right alone, but through a drift from the center toward the right, whether the left strongly exists or not. It follows the absorption of the political class into being servants of the wealthy or being the wealthy themselves.

What distinguishes right wing populism from that of the left is a fixation and recirculation of the mystical foundations of a nation, which in the South, Central, and North American contexts, centrally involve the mystification and recirculation of the racial prejudices

that were foundational for the earlier establishment of the modern nation states and their economic prosperity and wealth distributions.

The contemporary political shift to the right in the U.S. has occurred through the continual collapse of what was already only a partially democratic political system, with increasing political corruption ('influence peddling') by capital wealth in the legislative, executive, and indirectly in the judicial branches, and non-democratic presidential elections decided by an electoral college systems, the judiciary, and mass voting disenfranchisement, particularly of former felons and minority voters. Since Reagan, presidential power has also vastly increased, resulting in an 'imperial presidency,' with near immunity for the president and a massive concentration of power within the presidency. This period also has seen massive media concentration, then media fragmentation through new media, and then mass media remediation of new media. Also, the United States now has a wealth concentration unseen since the 19th century, erosion in public education, and increasing personal and public debt created through tax-cuts for the rich and war spending.

As will be discussed in this article, what distinguishes right from left extremism is the recirculation of prejudices. Instead of a Maoist type of cultural revolution that replaces the 'four olds' with the 'four news,' right wing extremism and fascism fetishize all the 'olds,' that were once thought to be buried in knowledge and practice: Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits, and Old Ideas. Right-wing extremism and Fascism function on the principle of zombie politics; their leaders are ventriloquist dummies of the forever dead political unconscious.

There is an important rhetorical signifier of right-wing populism and fascism that is first dominant in everyday life, then in mainstream media, and then in formal political or governmental discourse: knowledge and factual discourse are replaced by jokes and insults. In the beginning, liberalism joins this game. But, the turn to the right is then marked by how, in the political space opened up by the collapse of knowledge and the rise of the politics of the joke, a prejudicial, popular, 'information' comes to fill the space left by knowledge and knowledge institutions. The public state becomes literally a state of jokers, but eventually very mean and violent jokers.

The level of this cynicism about the 'joke' of the state is shown by the fact that the supposed savior of the oppressed can also sometimes be someone from the class that has most exploited them. As we know from Silvio Berlusconi's successful political campaigns in Italy and Donald Trump's election as president of the United States, the 'champion of the people' does not necessarily have to be from the class that has been exploited, though they must also appear to be from the political 'outside.' The politician's self-presentation as an 'outsider'

seems to trump all material class inscriptions. Someone like Berlusconi or Trump, two men of the media from the very top of the economic pyramid, is identified with because they are ‘outside’ the political class (even though they freely admit having controlled it). In the case of Berlusconi, he plays the buffo or clown of the still sometimes popular, Felliniesque, imagination of the everyday man in Italy, and in Trump’s case he plays the ‘boss’ of his former television show, *The Apprentice*. Both play to national stereotypes, while also literally directly or indirectly owning the media means of their reproduction. And, of course, they fan the flames of viewing the liberal state as an irredeemable state of corruption, because they are elitists and care little for such states. These media stars reenact fascism’s politics of the spectacle, beneath which they enact a *Realpolitik* that consolidates power and robs the very people they entertain. In the very midst of new media, they represent the mechanizations of corporate television, and thus they show how the internet has been remediated into a representational screen.

This remediation of new media (a media of seemingly personalized information retrieval) by old media (a media of broadcast) is neither an accident nor can it be attributed to only the mechanisms of capital ownership upon the internet (social media platforms such as Facebook, news aggregators such as Google news, etc.). Nor can it be totally attributed to the blurring of information and communication ecologies by digital mediation (such as with social networks). These are certainly important. But this reappearance of old in new media is also due to three other factors that I will investigate in this article: first, the rhetoric of ‘information’ and the ‘information age’ which started in the 1990s, but which has earlier, but largely forgotten, historical appearances in the 20th century (Day, 2001); second, the very function of information technology as a type of documentary technology (Day, 2014); and third, the political erosion and popular trust in knowledge institutions, partly as the result of 1 and 2, above, and partly as a result of misunderstandings about public knowledge (such as science) and knowledge institutions.

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THE SOCIOTECHNICAL AESTHETICS OF RIGHT-WING POPULISM

To understand the cultural and political rise of right-wing populism and fascism, we must understand the technical means by which they occur. Let’s focus upon two information ages: the 1920s through the 1930s and the current period. These socio-technical periods suggest that a political theory of far-right politics must include a political theory of information technology.

Walter Benjamin's 1935 essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Benjamin, 1968b), helps us understand a key technical component of both old and remediated new media in political movements. In this essay, Benjamin discusses the ability of film technology and its aesthetic means to reshape perception through focusing upon particular events, enlarging or shrinking the scale of these, and contrasting these with others. Benjamin's work viewed this technical intervention upon perception from the perspective of left politics, harking back to the role of technique in art as heralded in Soviet Constructivism. But the same techniques are used to construct right-wing populist activities, as was shown in Italian Futurism, via literature, cinema, newspapers, and radio (Hewitt, 1993). From the 'bully pulpit' of a political-media leader or his or her party, selective focus and montage creates the aesthetic possibility for new realities to be imagined. As we will discuss, with right-wing populism, these new realities are also old symbolisms. Through neo-classical forms and folkloric kitsch, right-wing populism and fascism aim toward retrieving aesthetic and ideological prejudgments and an idealistic time of the nation which never existed.

The ability of art technique or journalism to focus in upon one particular aspect or set of aspects of phenomena, just like a camera does, is precisely what gives its newness. It allows us to refocus our reality, bringing us either closer or more distant to our everyday life (Benjamin, 1968a). In right-wing propaganda, technique is embedded in political method, and this political method is that of the retrieval of prejudice for the attainment of mass politics. For this reason, for example, Leni Riefensthal, who made *Triumph of the Will*, could be both an innovative filmmaker and a devoted propagandist.

But there is a concurrent second refocusing that occurs in right-wing media politics. It occurs not at the level of perception, but at the level of cognition. In right-wing news what is brought into cognitive focus is the ideological encoding which is elicited by the *stimuli*. *Stimuli* is brought forward in order to conserve previous judgments. The stimulus is not informational, but rather the afterimage from such is, because the stimulus connects with coherent unconscious prejudgments or prejudices. Information is the meaning of the stimulus, not the stimulus 'itself.' This afterimage is what constitutes the 'information' of the article or image provided by the 'news' or by the political speaker. The speaker, writer, or artist responds to the situation (rhetorically speaking, the *kairos*) toward eliciting from the audience an afterimage that is actually a 'pre-image.' The 'stimulus' or signifier taps what Fredric Jameson called the "political unconscious" (JAMESON, 1981), and so a selectively framed or enlarged empirical event connects to an historical idea or concept which reads and recognizes it.

Right wing politics are ‘conservative’ because what they conserve is a collective unconscious of prejudgments or prejudices, and from these, a morality of inherent rights and righteousness emerge. In the media, the right asserts its rights to be inherent. Whereas left-wing aesthetics appeal to rupture for the sake of a new that has yet to appear, right-wing politics appeals to political rupture for the sake of an old that it claims that it has ever been. Right-wing ‘revolution’ starts from claims of foundational rights, within, but deeper, than the current state and its laws. It appeals to an exception to law—a ‘natural law’ of the state itself, beyond the state’s laws. It claims original intents of the state and its laws, and so it claims a state of exception within whatever is the current practices of the state’s laws. In right-wing politics, inherent information is retrieved from the unconscious for the sake of consciousness, claiming truth for concepts and practices of the true and false. (And for this reason, information becomes the enemy of knowledge and knowledge institutions).

Recalling prejudgments is the most primal form of information retrieval. We recall what has been written, what has become evidence, what is a subject of need. Information retrieval begins with what has become information, what was informative. And so the technical machinery of information science extends faculties of perception and cognition to the present and future.

II

What can document theory tell us about the politics of retrieval of hardened prejudgments—prejudices—, which elicit resentment and scapegoating through information and communication technologies?

First, we must discard two notions of information that are prevalent not only in document theory and information science, but also in society at large, during the 20th century—two notions that underlie a metaphysics of information in modernity.

The first notion is that the term ‘information’ refers to empirical *stimuli*. In cognition, information is not empirical *stimuli*, but rather, it is what empirical *stimuli* connect to for understanding. Empirical *stimuli*, whether created by the environment or aesthetics, become informative, they become evidence—that is, they become meaningful—when they connect to concepts (which may be built of mental and/or physical actions). Here, we leave the naïve empiricism of Shannon-Weaver information theory (Shannon & Weaver, 1949) and we recognize the significance of Kant’s theory of cognition—and later that of the Frankfurt School’s—in Kant’s critique of dogmatism and the latter’s social critical theory, where it is the

faculties of the mind and how they are socially and culturally formed which give meaning or organization to *stimuli*.

The second, related, notion that we need to discard is the positivist notion that information is a synonym for ‘fact.’ Namely, that it is the representations, rather than the *stimuli*, that constitute the facticity of information. This legacy in documentation theory and later information science can be found in the works of the ‘father’ of 20th century European documentation, Paul Otlet. In Otlet’s works, the ideational contents of documentary works are seen as the ‘facts’ about the natural and social worlds. In Otlet’s positivist vision of books and libraries, these materials contain facts, by which Otlet means knowledge, which itself is a synonym for truth. The synonymous collapse of all these terms into one another together is epistemologically afforded by means of a correspondence theory of truth (*adaequatio rei et intellectus*, in the medieval tradition) and by the conduit theory of communication, where understanding is the transmission of ideas from one mind to another via a conduit of speech, writing, or other ‘transmission’ channels (Day, 2000, 2001; Reddy, 1979).

Information in right-wing populism and fascist politics is neither *stimuli* nor is it knowledge. Not only is it not *stimuli* because information can never be seen as ‘just’ *stimuli* (if what we mean by this is meaningful signification), but in these political discourses *stimuli* are also cognitively certain—there is little ambiguity or hermeneutics in interpreting the signs of others and their signifieds. It is not conscious thought that is aimed for with the ‘message’ or *stimuli* of right-wing information, but the unconscious image, unambiguous judgment, and action. To be politically right is to be right in judgment, no matter the discursive or democratic process that are entertained beforehand or simultaneously. The referent of information immediately moves from sense to reference, which allows the senses to be reactionary, rather than interpretative, because the goal is not ‘theory,’ but determinate action (power). Determinate action demands that cognition be reactionary, which means that *stimuli* be immediately understood within categories of cognition, which preferably are themselves attached to agents or organizations of expressions of power. (The distrust of intellect and intellectuals, of ‘theory,’ and the trust in direct and immediate ‘action’ is a hallmark of populist right-wing politics.) The origin of reference is not *stimuli*, but archetypes, beliefs, and unsaid premises in what, supposedly, ‘everyone [already and always] knows.’

My thesis is that we cannot account for the success of populist far-right politics without accounting for prejudgments in the ideological and political unconscious, as the root of their intellectual conservatism and their practical reactionary qualities. I suggest that such mental and social retrievals of prejudicial ‘information’ intersect with the socio-technical functions of

information technologies as concept and identity indexing and retrieval technologies, both in older documentary systems and today's 'new media.'

How do information technologies aid prejudice and ideology?

DOCUMENTATION AND TECHNOLOGIES OF USER 'NEEDS'

In order to understand how today's information technologies, which address user needs, also serve right-wing populist politics, we need to understand what indexing and search technologies do. Indexing and search are essentially two sides of the same coin: to search, one searches an index of terms. (Which may then be ranked in relation to the search terms used, previous user searches, through link-analysis systems such as Google PageRank, etc.). We will therefore address indexing and search together through the concept of the search algorithm or simply "algorithm."

Traditionally in information science theory, documentary systems have been viewed as helping users with needs find documents that correspond to those needs via indexes of documents. In traditional documentation systems in a predigital age, this was performed through technologies such as classification systems and controlled vocabulary. In digital environments, search is often mediated by algorithms that increase relevancy or precision through computational techniques, such as utilizing analytical, social, and iterative graph relations between index terms or other input data (Thomas, 2018).

While the differences between traditional, pre-algorithmic, and new media algorithmic technologies are important, they essentially have the same goal, namely, coordinating the matching of user needs and documentary resources. Following the emphasis in Library and Information Science during the latter half of the 20th century and still today upon the concept of 'users,' the directionality of this match has been seen as starting from a user's need for information in a document to the mediating indexing/search system and then to the information or document. Users are thought to have information needs in their personal minds or 'heads,' for which they are then seeking 'information' in order to fulfill.

As I have previously argued, however, even a physical collection shows that this simple directionality of need is backwards, or is at least lacking feedback loops between documents and their collections and users, starting from the collection (Day, 2014). For example, if one is going to a library with the desire to know about something, then whatever one desires is refined into a need by means of what is available in the library's collections and what is represented by an index and by other library tools. The same principle applies with digital systems, including

such massive ‘collections’ as the internet. In a library, a user’s need is not just limited, but shaped, by the actual collection. And beyond this, information needs are shaped by what the library collects, what publishers have published, what is considered to be informative or not, and finally by the cultural forms, social norms of meaning, and physical means or affordances for whatever is considered to be ‘information.’ (These last constitute constellations of concepts or ideas, which we can call, quite literally, *ideo-logy*.)

To restate from a psychological perspective, we need to remember that all persons or ‘users’ are born into language and its use, and individual minds or ‘selves’ or only personalized collections or ‘toolboxes’ of such. Personal psychology is a subset of social psychology, which is made up of cultural forms and their normative uses. ‘Information needs’ are products of cultural forms, social norms, and materials that are considered to be informative in a variety of senses. While there are personal minds and personal information needs, they are only possible—and only understandable by other people and by information systems—given the *a priori*, collective, nature of ‘language’ (i.e., meaningful signs). We are, in a Lacanian fashion, *subjects-of-(information)-needs* (Day, 2017).

In brief, contrary to the user-centered model in Library and Information Science, documentary theory tells us that the relation of so-called ‘user’ needs and ‘information’ is the reverse of what is assumed; that the user is socially, culturally, and epistemically positioned by that which they subsequently use, just like a plumber is a plumber because of the tools that they have and can use in their plumbing trade. The different types of algorithms that Neal Thomas discusses in his book, *Becoming-Social in a Networked Age* (Thomas, 2018)—analytical (e.g., the semantic web), social (e.g., Facebook, using social relations via graph theory) and “predictive-analytic” (e.g., convolutional neural networks in machine learning that use weighted iterations) are methods for co-indexing user-subjects and document-objects (‘information’) within universes of ‘ideology’ and need. Not surprisingly then, information systems in their totality reflect, and in their particular activities index, the political unconscious, as well.

WHAT DOCUMENT THEORY CAN TELL US ABOUT FAKE NEWS AND MEMES

Fake news and internet memes are contemporary modes of propaganda. Fake news and memes work in a similar way: they elicit unconscious prejudices or ‘bias’ through unproven statements or ‘information.’

In order to understand both fake news and memes, let us look at the term ‘meme.’ The term comes from Richard Dawkins’ 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* and it refers to biological and ideational transmission units. However, the term also shares Ancient Greek roots with the term *enthymeme*. *Enthymemes* are syllogistic arguments where one or both premises for a conclusion are not given, but rather, they are filled in by the reader or listener.

Fake news and internet memes function as enthymemes, affirming their conclusions (i.e., their ‘information’) from unsaid premises. Their evidence is drawn from the ideological unconscious. Their rhetorical structure is similar to jokes, and most of all to insults, in that the initial premise or premises are not given, but rather, assumed.

To show how fake news and memes can work in any political context, but also to suggest how we have all been turned into anxiety plagued ‘meme warriors’ by bloggers and others, let’s take as our example an anti-Trump meme that has circulated on the Internet. (Given media reports on the methods of Russian information media operatives or ‘bloggers’ in the U.S. 2016 election, we should also bear in mind with this example the role of provocations as part of a ‘strategy of tensions.’)

The meme consists of a photo of the U.S. president Donald Trump, which is framed by a statement above the photo that reads, “I believe in traditional marriage” and a statement below the photo that reads, “I’ve had three of them!” This meme is humorous in the way that insults are humorous, with logical or linguistic plays between terms of a syllogism, leading the target of the insult to be shown to be shown to be a fool or hypocrite. As a form of argument, the meme is an enthymeme. The missing premise of this meme—the assumption in the mind of the listener—is given in brackets, below:

- All those who believe in ‘traditional marriage’ cannot be married more than once;
- Trump has been married more than once;
- Therefore, Trump cannot believe in traditional marriage.

Besides being culturally transmitted tropes used in political battles, political memes are badges of identification. They signify, ‘this is who I am (or someone else is)’ or ‘this is what I believe (or someone else believes).’ They are public tokens that are appropriated by individuals to affirm and express belief, identity, and solidarity. They are sort of the weapons and uniforms of meme warriors and the parties or sides that they belong to.

Memes give conclusion statements (or as we may say in the documentary tradition, “documents,” or today, “information”) that suggest that they have potentially demonstrable evidence or proof behind them. The existential difficulty with this is that because they appear as written statements of fact and we are accustomed to ‘print’ (including digital print) statements and documents potentially having evidence behind them, we are sometimes seduced into believing that such informational statements are also knowledge or potentially knowledge statements. As I have argued, however, Information is not necessarily knowledge, and, indeed, most information on the internet is not knowledge. Knowledge requires institutions, methods of evidence production (including logical argument), and verification. Information is simply that which is informative. The referents and senses for the term ‘information’ can range from sensory *stimuli* to knowledge forms to beliefs to items of taste. The association of ‘information’ with ‘facts,’ and both with books and the printed word, is a result of the bibliographic tradition and the rhetoric of the most recent ‘information age’ discourse (Day, 2001). Information, however, is not necessarily knowledge. We are often seduced by the printed word or image to think that there is, at least potentially, argument or empirical proof supporting their informative statements, even when such may be completely absent.

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Memes, as types of enthymemes (and likewise, fake news), pull from the collective unconscious of prejudice. They are tailor made for a culture of politics as jokes and for the punchlines of television personalities. The joke is upon all of us, though, if we take these forms as anything approaching knowledge. A political space filled with memes suggests a prior breakdown in knowledge and discourse in public space. A politics of jokes turns us all into jokers, and it creates a joke out of knowledge and struggles for a politics based on knowledge. Beyond the society of the spectacle, when we most need knowledge, we become the society of imbeciles.

LIBRARIANSHIP AND OTHER ‘INFORMATION PROFESSIONS’

Unfortunately, some of the very tropes and values most elicited by librarianship, at least in the United States, are not altogether helpful in combating the above problems. This is not because they aren’t well intentioned, but because they hardly go deeper in their arguments than enthymemes themselves.

The American Librarian Association (ALA)’s ‘read’ campaign is adorned on posters throughout public and school libraries. And while literacy is an important quality of any modern society, in itself it is hardly the central tool for combating prejudice or political extremism in

modern societies. After all, so much of our time is spent reading the internet, reading email, reading news, reading memes, ‘reading’ images, films, etc. Indeed, as Maurizio Ferraris has pointed out, the information society is a society of writing and reading (Ferraris, 2013). We now read more than we probably ever did before. Further, reading has been a quality of both extreme political left and right movements throughout modernity. And an emphasis upon basic literacy doesn’t address some other ALA intellectual freedom concerns, such as censorship and propaganda, much less the self-propagandizing tendency of memes.

What is lacking is not reading, but rather two other factors: critical literacy skills and understanding knowledge and knowledge institutions. Information literacy is important. But, the problem of information literacy is much more than ‘information’ vs. ‘misinformation,’ as the problem is sometimes posed. Information literacy involves understanding how libraries and other library-like institutions function within a spectrum of knowledge institutions, such as museums, laboratories, and scientific field work. The problem involves understanding how something becomes knowledge, and how libraries and other documentary institutions have a role in this.

As I’ve mentioned, the language of ‘information’ as being knowledge (‘fact’) is, in part, a remnant of Paul Otlet’s bibliographic idealism and positivism, where books and other documentary materials are seen as containers for ideas or ‘information,’ and such information is seen as synonymous with facts. This view continued and became quite strong in the subsequent years of the 20th century, culminating with the vision of the internet as a zone of knowledge.

But Otlet’s library or bibliographic-centric celebration of information as knowledge is actually very skeptical of knowledge institutions other than libraries. In Otlet’s view of documentation, institutions that produce knowledge, such as laboratories, are subsumed within the institution of the library and its (for Otlet) representational materials; from research, facts are then recorded in books, synthesized in abstracts and metadata, and disseminated by libraries. Libraries and books are viewed as the end products of research, rather than as moments within it.

As uncomfortable as it might be, there is a certain epistemically analogous relation between a bibliographic notion of truth and a right-wing political notion of truth—both seek a certain knowledge, and both remain grounded in an epistemology of representation. Both promote a concept of information that is freed from material and institutional contingencies for its production. Both promote truth, rather than the true, and they remain skeptical of the later until it can conform to the former. Both rely on a facticity that is not material, but rather,

ideational. At an epistemological level, Otlet's positivism is an idealism, and so it lies next to, rather than opposed, to the truth of right-wing politics. Otlet's bibliographic idealism celebrates a truth that forecloses debate, a truth that Otlet sees as found in documents and the documents found in libraries, a truth that is a representation of natural and social facts. There is a desire for certainty so that determinate actions can take place. (For Otlet, though, not toward power and war, but toward peace).

Despite these similarities in beliefs in certain, representational, knowledge, right-wing populism remains distrustful of knowledge institutions (including libraries). Where does this distrust in knowledge institutions arise from? In right-wing populism this distrust of institutions that produce or 'have' knowledge (including libraries) comes from, first, a distrust in the popular social and cultural functions of such institutions (as institutions which from the viewpoint of everyday cognition and 'immediate action' seem devoted to purely 'theoretical' or 'intellectual' knowledge—i.e., mediated and consensual action), and, second, also a distrust of consensual populism and politics more generally. The distrust is upon not only intellectual institutions of any sort, but upon non-'nationalistic' social and political values. In brief, the distrust is upon communally mediated knowledge, rather than upon what is heralded as immediate, 'personal' knowledge, or instinct.

In terms of knowledge institutions, most people today don't understand what knowledge institutions do and how knowledge is constructed. Scientific knowledge, for example, can lead to a lot of disappointments, not only for people producing and working with the knowledge, but for people who are more generally affected by it. For example, cancer treatments are not certain, and even the notion of 'having cancer' may not be certain. Illness is not only a physical process, but it is contingent on cultural, social, institutional, and technological affordances. Doctors give different opinions. Climate change is not directly observable; it depends on inferences and modeling.

Let's face it: there's uncertainty everywhere with knowledge—that's how knowledge is—it is uncertain—and in the face of this, images and descriptions of 'what is' with certainty are tempting to rely on. Knowledge and 'facts' are produced in relation to what is. Facts are not 'in nature' nor are they found in books nor are they products of hope, though nature, books, and hope are, of course, involved in the production of knowledge. Knowledge is institutional; is it culturally, socially, technologically, and materially contingent. When we are in conditions of fear, particularly fear for our lives, it is hard to trust the experts when the experts are experts of contingency.

‘Knowledge,’ like ‘information,’ has unfortunately been taken to be substantives, due to these noun forms, whereas what these terms refer to are acts of knowing and acts of being informed. To ‘have’ knowledge in a private sense of ‘knowledge’ is to have abilities (such as the ability to speak French within some standard of what constitutes ‘speaking French’) and to ‘have’ knowledge in a public sense of ‘knowledge’ is to have not only the ability to produce knowing acts, but also to have documents and other resources to do such. ‘Knowledge’ is only as certain as the tools, methods, education, learned people, and institutions that afford it. It always already includes the possibility to doubt. Certainty is just the lack of doubt, not its absence. (The possibility of doubt must already be part of a process of becoming or being certain in order for it to be lacking.)

This contingency of knowledge—knowledge as contingency—which makes it simultaneously doubtable and certain, is difficult for people to understand and also to feel comfortable or certain about, especially when it involves issues of their life and death. Against knowledge is the ‘certainty’ of dogmatic truths, beliefs, and prejudice. People prefer truth to what is true, they prefer images and representations rather than contingencies and processes, they prefer certain and transcendental identities, rather than dispositions and affordances. Most of us live our lives as Platonists, not Aristotelians. We live our lives as infinite and certain, rather than as finite and contingent. And that, in a nutshell, is the problem with knowledge and knowledge institutions, particularly in political situations of distrust and fear. And, in a nutshell, this is why right-wing populism desires fear and breeds in fear—because it produces the information needs that it best responds to. A politics of crisis leads directly to right-wing populism. Crisis demands information needs and the information needs it demands are certain truths—that is, information masquerading as knowledge.

When institutional knowledge is eroded, to the ‘rescue’ comes new media ‘information’ technologies, that promise to put knowledge in the hands of users. Not as contingent knowledge requiring study, discourse, and consensus, but as retrieved ‘facts.’ However, much of what is information in our lives correspond to habits of the social norm and reflect the political unconscious: shopping, friendship, opinions, and other functions of ‘liking’ or ‘disliking.’ As it has evolved as a media technology, the internet has relatively little to do with knowledge institutions or the products of such. Most of what people do on the internet involves positioning themselves in tastes and affects that have little to do with fields of public knowledge. There’s nothing intrinsically wrong with this, of course. The problem is that we are foolish if we think that this information is knowledge, at least how knowledge has evolved in modernity within institutional and public forms for evidence and discourse.

If we take Google search, for example, and compare it to its predecessor citation system of Web of Science, we can see that the former indexes far more than scholarly, peer reviewed, journals, for example. Google search was never constructed to index the knowledge of the world. It was constructed to index that which is informative more broadly. And information is not necessarily knowledge. Nor are libraries fundamentally just information distributors. And library and information science departments are not just informatics departments, either. Most libraries, if not all in their distinguishing functions, are concerned with knowledge, and so the academic studies attached to such are also fundamentally concerned with knowledge, although they also do take into their domain information of all sorts. Librarians are fundamentally knowledge, not information, professionals, though they may be, of course, relatively more concerned with information more broadly (for example, public librarians). In their collections and professional values and ethics, they are bound to institutions that are allied to other knowledge institutions.

CONCLUSION

Right-wing political populism and fascism mystify contemporary events with old prejudices. They use new media to recreate prejudicial mediations between people and their worlds in very customized manners. It is extremely important to respond to this, but we must also rebuild the knowledge institutions and their values for society and the world.

To “fight fire with fire,” to use the words of the United States late-night television comedian Stephen Colbert in his critical response to politicians such as Donald Trump, is of limited help in the fight against prejudice, as it reduces information, and so, political space for most people, to the realm of (enthy) memes, insults, and jokes. A politics of televised or internet jokesters shows the failure of a political system that already doesn’t allow knowledgeable democratic participation and it show the confusion of information and knowledge. We have to conclude that the Enlightenment mandates of critical public knowledge and public education are far from being accomplished.

The contingent knowledge of science and scholarship need to be better explained to the more general public. Knowledge institutions need to be rebuilt in the direction of public space. Public space is being occupied by information that is attention grabbing: narcissistic, commodity-oriented, and reinforcing of prejudices. The public needs to understand that the popular media that they are exposed to constantly is not a guarantor of knowledge nor is even meant to be. They need to understand that the internet is not necessarily a space for knowledge.

They need to understand that information is not necessarily knowledge and that information can just as well be used against knowledge as for it. People need to understand how information technologies, both old and new, are used against them, turning people into meme-warriors and puppets of the politically powerful, the wealthy, and the media manipulators.

Information is no substitute for knowledge, and information technologies are no substitute for education. To be knowledgeable one needs not just information, but one needs education. To transform society, we need knowledge to build social capital, not prejudice. Knowledge institutions, including libraries and public education, have a vital role to play in opposing prejudice and dogmatism. Now, at the cusp of not only the catastrophe of the world, but the catastrophe of the earth for most of its existing types of beings, we cannot afford a return to the dark ages of ignorance and old beliefs that populist right-wing politics and fascism urge us toward.

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