

# Introduction

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# Disclaimer

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- This presentation contains contentious political content.
- I have taken a perspective on the issues that may not accord with some popular political views. My belief is that a professor professes – that my job is to provide an interpretation of events, policies, positions or subject matter. That does not mean it is only justifiable interpretation about events or the subject matter.
- These lectures reflect my views derived from research, reason, evidence, and legitimate sources. It does not represent the Information School of Kent State University or that of Kent State University
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- However, if you argue for any position – whether it aligns with mine or not, it must be based on verifiable evidence, facts, reason and legitimate sources.
- If you send me email ([tfroehli@kent.edu](mailto:tfroehli@kent.edu)) concerning a particular issue that you do not understand or doubt, I will strive to make a reasoned response, given that your concerns are based on facts, reason, evidence or authentic sources (for example, in making a different interpretation of events).

# The Dual Consequences to the Information Age

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- One of the consequences of the age of information is that the growth and advent of the internet, particularly in the growth of communication and social media, has not only promoted the growth of information and potential knowledge, but also the growth of ignorance in its various forms and guises: misinformation, disinformation, paltering, fake news, and attacks on credible news sources.
- Access to the internet is now, more often than not, access to resources that reinforce biases, ignorance, prejudgments, and stupidity.
- Parallel to a right to information, we have created in practice a right to lies and ignorance.
- Not only that: we, whether as individuals, groups or institutions like the government, have the legal right in the United States to disseminate ignorance and to block venues of facts and truth, and smugly claim to present lies and distortions as "alternative facts."
- It could be argued that we have entered an age of the Anti-Enlightenment, in which knowledge gained systematically and through careful observation of the environment is rejected and replaced by arrogant anti-science, anti-humanitarian propaganda whose misinformation or disinformation is transmitted through traditional (e.g., print, cable) and social media.

# The Age of the Anti-Enlightenment

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- The Enlightenment (roughly starting in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe) encompassed a variety of ideas centered on reason as the primary source of authority and righteousness, not church, royalty, or political or inherited rank,
- It advanced ideals of individual liberty, constitutional government, separation of church and state and religious tolerance.
- Many of these notions were institutionalized in the U S Constitution and in the structure of our government.
- Not all aspects of the Enlightenment were positive according to some thinkers. In fact, one nun believes that some aspects of it have contributed to negative aspects of contemporary life and political activities in that life.
- For Sr. Joan Chittister, the Enlightenment has increasingly favored radical individualism and denigrated the common good. Its fruition lies in many examples of contemporary culture, for example, where anti-maskers scream at store personnel when asked to don a mask for public health. Their individual civil rights trump any concern for a common or public good. She has come to call their view “toxic individualism” (Chittister, 2020) derived from Enlightenment ideals.
- In the current environment, individual liberty is now claimed to support partisan politics (only *my* politics are true, my rights allow me to attack established science), to erase the separation of church and state (America was established as a *Christian* nation), and to attack reason and evidence, so as to support intolerance of those whose views are different from my partisan view.

# The Age of Disinformation

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- Disinformation is false information by which its creators and disseminators intend to deceive its receivers. It has always been around.
- What has changed is level, speed, breadth, coordination, aggregation, and effectiveness of disinformation both through media and social media, for the purposes of greed, control or political power.
- Because of its widespread use and effects, the Age of Information has become the Age of Disinformation. In fact, such disinformation turns into propaganda by authorities and political media that repeat the same messages through multiple channels and institutions, that facilitates its acceptance and normalcy, especially where alternative resources are suppressed or invalidated. Saturation, repetition, and emotional manipulation are key to the success of disinformation campaigns
- Ironically, one of the factors that has facilitated the upsurge in the acceptance of disinformation or misinformation is the huge growth of information sources, services, media.
- Information overload and information availability through hundreds of sources, channels and media make it difficult to process difficult questions and to find simplistic solutions to complex problem. One's Google search is used to invalidate the slow and painstaking research of 1000s of scientists.

# The Age of Disinformation

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- The internet has facilitated the trend of providing voices promoting anything from lies to disinformation or misinformation to truth. The problem is that we do not know whether they are an individual, group, troll, click-bait entrepreneurs, foreign agents, political factions or whatever.
- The voice of the few can become the shrill voice of the presumed many, though it is often not the case.
- The voice of fringe groups not only drown out other voices but claim those other voices are illegitimate. Prior to the internet persons with extreme or unhinged views were physically isolated to at best small groups or to a limited geography
- With the ease of social media, it is quite easy to find like-minded people and build groups that appear to have a important, or at least loud, voice.
- There are few, if any, constraints about what any person or group are alleging about other individuals, groups, media sources, or events. Their true source is often hidden.
- But it is clear that much of the content on the web is unmediated – there are no editors, no fact checkers, no source verifiers to adjudicate the published information. Even if we know that the publisher asserts itself to be an authority, it is not clear. Even if one has great critical thinking abilities, one is hard pressed to determine the verifiability of certain alleged content (despite information literacy training).

# The Age of Disinformation

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- There is the false assertion that all opinions are equal on the web. This belief is known as “false equivalences.” While it is true that everyone is entitled to their opinion, not all opinions are well-formed or founded. As noted above, because what is posted on the internet cannot be sourced to an individual person, group or political cause, all postings have the appearance of having equal weight.
- Furthermore, when posting such opinions on social media like Facebook, they seem to gain additional weight by likes and comments that have little to do with their actual veracity or the substance of the post. The “likes” normally just confirms the confirmation bias of the reader of the post, rather than providing substantial support for the opinion offered.
- The internet, rather a presumed neutral information supplier, has turned into a source that manipulates one to pay attention to selected content or products or directs you to engage in material that solicits your emotions and purchasing behavior
- The source of news has changed dramatically over the past 20 years, from print and television to social media. Facebook and Twitter aren’t just participants in the information marketplace. They’re quickly becoming the information marketplace. (Reich, 2019). 45% of Americans rely on Facebook for news and Trump’s tweets [when he was president] reached 66 million is because these platforms are near monopolies, dominating the information marketplace. No TV network, cable giant or newspaper even comes close.

# The Death of Expertise

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- With the belief that all opinions are equal, the notion of expertise is challenged.
- Even when we may come to accept the false claim that all opinions have equal value, in the current climate, the opinion of a partisan political view trumps all other opinions, whether they are based on science, evidence, logic or not.
- Science is not only denigrated but rejected if it does not concord with a political agenda. Thousands of Americans have died as a consequence of the acceptance of disinformation or misinformation about COVID-19.
- Expertise of whatever character is not only challenged but rejected: real news, science, climate change, environmental issues, national security information, etc. are all said to not exist or be a hoax, and any contrary evidence is claimed to be fake.
- It is easy to think that one has expertise when one does not.
- Given the ubiquity of search engines and technologies to access them, many information seekers can come to believe
  - that anyone can be a searcher (true, but very few are good searchers or have the skills or experience to hone their queries and assess the results properly);
  - that the answers that are offered to them are reliable and the best possible, based on some presumed expertise on the part of the engine (search engines do have a bias and few searchers spend the time to sort through information beyond the fold in the first page of hits) and
  - that everyone can be an expert about any content and that in no way is the content skewed to searcher's background or biases. (clickbait solicits clicking on content that confirms our confirmation bias.



# Emotional Engagement

- We know that Facebook content is built around the profile of the user, that is built up from a person's engagement while using social media. And the algorithm that drives YouTube drives users to more and more extreme content.
- Certain words become memes or flash points of anger or points of unsubstantiated self-righteousness. Persons on the right often call themselves conservatives, but this word, as many other words, seems to have strayed from traditional meanings: a 'conservative' used to mean fiscal responsibility and a fierce allegiance to democracy and business. This traditional meaning does not jive with what in fact has occurred. The national debt was easily expanded for tax cuts for the rich (based on trickle-down economics). While communist countries are typically shunned by conservatives, the last administration cozied up to dictators and authoritarian governments.
- Big business is overwhelmingly in favor of requiring that workers get vaccinated against COVID-19. A recent CNBC survey of chief financial officers found that 80 percent of them say they "totally support" the Biden administration's plan to impose a vaccine-or-test mandate on companies with more than 100 workers, and many companies have already announced vaccination requirements for their employees.  
[https://www.cnbc.com/2021/10/08/as-covid-fears-in-c-suite-spike-big-companies-back-vaccine-mandates.html?te=1&nl=paul-krugman&emc=edit\\_pk\\_20211013](https://www.cnbc.com/2021/10/08/as-covid-fears-in-c-suite-spike-big-companies-back-vaccine-mandates.html?te=1&nl=paul-krugman&emc=edit_pk_20211013)
- Yet alt-right media and social media portray such constraints as an assault on individual rights and capitalism.
- It is not the case that this problematic behavior only occurs on the right: there are cancel-culture wars where a person's past of past comments are held against them as a kind of moral outrage that stains that entire person. One of the more troubling recent examples is a professor at the University of Michigan who was forced away from teaching a class on music composition (adapting Shakespeare to opera) when students complained that he had shown a video of Lawrence Olivier playing Otello in blackface. This attack is just as bad as a attacks on critical race theory, which has been used to incite parents for a sanitized version of the history of racism.

# Polarization

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- What has exploded these inclinations is the polarization of American society, starting in the last century, and coming to the culmination in the rhetoric and disinformation campaigns used in the election and presidency of Donald Trump and his subsequent attempt at reelection and claims that the last election was stolen from him.
- While we have to be careful with absolute differentiations, there are two major kinds of information seekers in the Age of Disinformation:
  1. Those that live in a closed propaganda feedback loop, filter bubble or disinformation ecology and
  2. Those that don't, from those who are open to considering different perspectives on an issue to those who oppose anti-democracy activities
- There is a third group, the disenfranchised or go-alongers who by default support the first group by their inaction or acquiescence to the dominant view of their friends or peer group.
- What the first half of these presentations hopes to do is to show who this first group is, how they come to identify with this group, how they adhere to certain authorities and reject any others as fake, and how they are manipulated to achieve political or consumer ends. More than 30% of Americans are members of this group.

# Create Chaos

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- As we shall show in later lectures, this polarization primarily due to the first group, recognizing that foreign actors, click-bait entrepreneurs, anarchists and conspiracy theorists are also interested in creating chaos in American democracy to undermine democratic institutions and create civil unrest in order to prepare for a authoritarian form of government where one and only one party wins elections, rigged by such things as voter suppression, gerrymandering and partisan control of election processes.
- At any event, the first set of lectures will example the structure of partisan politics that creates and controls them; the second set of lectures will focus on rational approaches to disinformation or misinformation that generally not work with the first group: information literacy, media literacy, digital literacy, violations of ethical principles and understanding logical fallacies.
- At the conclusion, both apart from and in relation to political polarization, attention merchants, the use of persuasive technologies, and surveillance capitalism have a serious negative impact of the critical thinking ability of internet users.
- At any event, this polarization has had problematic consequences.

# Beyond Disagreeing to Disagree

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- What makes this war of misinformation and disinformation even more critical is that not only that contrary views to be rejected and that any authorities other than their own are to be rejected, but also that the only authentic authorities are theirs and all other sources and content are fake news and fake news providers.
- While the first group wants to assert that the differences between the first and second group is a matter of differing “facts,” in reality it is a war of disinformation against knowledge, settled science, evidence, logic and traditional, orthodox authorities.
- The level of the extent of the success of disinformation is the amount of anger and “moral outrage” exhibited and expressed against those that have an opinion that runs contrary to their tribal opinion. It is one thing for one citizen disagree with another in how they are addressing the pandemic, it is another to scream at and shame them for their position when it disagrees with one’s beliefs or what has been absorbed from one’s media, political or religious authorities.

# Problems for Librarians: Supply Disinformation or the Truth?

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- We do have a growing problem, one that has always been there, but which has grown exponentially in the Age of Disinformation.
- For example, a patron wants to seek “information” to prove the correctness of the latest conspiracy theory.
- Do you supply the “information” or do you try to move them to more orthodox truths? There is a tension in the ALA guidance:
- Consider the first two precepts of the Library Bill of Rights:
  - I. Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.
  - II. Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval. (Library Bill of Rights).
- There is a tension between the objective of providing enlightenment (i.e., genuine understanding based on evidence and reasoning) and providing materials representing all points of view, including apparently those containing disinformation or misinformation.
- Should you supply “information” that patron seeks to defend their belief in a conspiracy theory? Is it ethical to do so? It is not ethical to do so? Are librarians and information specialists really neutral information providers? What about Facebook?

# A right to misinformation?

- It is clear that patrons have a right to have genuine information available in a library. Johannes Britz et al. (2021) following D'Agostini, an Italian philosopher, argue that patrons have alethic rights, rights to truth and that materials must be available in libraries to let them realize that right.
- But given the power of the alt-right (for the most part) to seek “information” to support their political agenda, is not such misinformation be made available to them (assuming a stance of professional neutrality). Does a patron have a right to disinformation? And that such disinformation deserve to be included in library collections or other information sources?
- Because of the connective power of social media on the internet, there are now louder and stronger voices dictating censorship of libraries and their contents as well as advocating information for alt-right causes. There are more and more attacks on certain materials in libraries and more and more political activists have taken control of library boards. Are libraries ready to such events? We will return to this issue at the end, but we need to raise questions, in fact, old questions, but whose volume has been raised an unbearable level.

# The Freedom to Lie

- In relation to this tension in principles of the ALA Bill of Rights, it might be useful to look at library policies, reflecting on a 1989 debate between John Swan and Noel Peattie detailed in book entitled *The Freedom to Lie: A Debate About Democracy* (Swan & Peattie, 1989).
- John Swan (taking a liberal view) argued that role of the librarian is to promote access, and this includes access to all sorts of materials, including that which is intolerable.
- He argued libraries should have copies of McCalden's *The Holocaust Did Not Happen*, a holocaust revisionist tract.
- Swan's main points include:
  - Toleration is meaningless without tolerance for what some may regard as detestable.
  - The librarian's truth is freedom, freedom of access.
  - Librarians are caught in a dilemma: "We are committed both to the search for truth and the freedom of expressions of untruth."
- Given these assumptions, Swan argues that a librarian's "chief professional commitment must be to access rather than truth" (p. 16). This would include lies and misrepresentations.
- But the notion of what is intolerable has dramatically changed – we have 30%+ Americans living in a closed propaganda feedback loop, intent on destroying democratic institutions (balance of power, fair voting laws, constitutional rights for all citizens, equal representation, fair taxation, etc.). Is the destruction of democracy to be tolerated by the demands and control of the few, especially the loud and stoked few?



# The Freedom to Lie

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- Noel Peattie (1989) takes a more conservative view in response, saying that a library is under no obligation to collect such works, because truth does matter as an important factor in making collection development decisions.
- He writes:
  - Either we do know or do not know some matters of fact, and if we do, then we have no obligation to support lies, or to omit the notion that it is a lie from our consideration in whether to purchase a source or not.
  - Either we know or do not know some matters of fact. The Holocaust did happen. Climate change is happening.
  - Of the variety of truths in the library, the librarian can only hope, not know, that a reader has enough education, patience, and discernment, to engage in the sorting process and come out with the right answer.
  - McCalden's views are lies, falsehoods deliberately uttered to deceive and hurt people, by a person who really knows the truth but deliberately denies or distorts it.



# The Freedom to Lie

- Given the growth of disinformation and misinformation pushed by partisan political agendas, how are the collection developers to achieve a balance in a collection? How do they satisfy those that live in a “closed propaganda feedback loop”? It seems that Peattie’s position looks rather more attractive and any notion of professional neutrality needs to be questioned. Should librarians undertake by all efforts possible to bolster information to support a patron’s belief in a conspiracy theory or that views and political agenda of an opposite political party must not be tolerated?
- While we grant that many librarians are not subject experts (particularly in a public library), are they to hide behind professional neutrality so as to avoid dealing with queries that support disinformation or misinformation? If a librarian does not know the truth about a particular topic or at least what the orthodox approaches are, they should have the ability to find it out.
- As Patrick Wilson (1987) notes, librarians are supposed to be experts about experts and have the information literacy skills to find out at least the range of possible interpretations about a political issue. To make things more problematic, given the spread of political views in the population (even the more radical ones), some librarians may be victim of extremist views (just as there are nurses who are opposed to vaccine mandates despite their general understanding of medical science). Would they abandon the possibility of legitimate sources in favor of a partisan viewpoint? Or that they are engaging in ethical behavior by supplying misinformation?

# Libraries vs Internet Resources

- Access to the content of libraries and the information sources on the internet are not the same, but they have some shared problems.
- Should any content be made available from any source on the internet with no controls? Google, Facebook and Twitter seem to think so for the most part (part of their profit motive). They, other service providers and social media are huge information-disinformation-misinformation banks from which anyone can select anything or are enticed to select specific content.
- Should we paraphrase Peattie? Of the variety of truths on the internet, one can only hope, not know, that a information seeker has enough education, patience, and discernment, to engage in the sorting process and come out with the right answer, that is, to sort out genuine information from disinformation or misinformation.
- The belief that internet information seekers are able to sort things out for themselves is extremely doubtful, given such qualities as a poor education, lack of literacy skills (information, media, digital), the politicization of certain content and click-bait oriented to feeding and inflaming one's biases, attention merchants, and persuasive technologies

# Attention Merchants

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- What has changed the name of the game are the attention merchants who design the gimmicks, ploys or widgets to capture our attention, in Google, Facebook and other social media. It is often less a matter of what is left or right than what grabs our attention, politically, socially, commercially, etc.
- In the age of distraction, truth is “whatever makes you click” (Wijnberg, 2020) or whatever you allow to be pushed at you. In the age of inflamed grievances, truth is whatever you are predisposed and inflamed to click, and the solicited notifications that rile your biases. This latter view will be the concern of the next set of lectures.