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**Dossier temático: Ética de la Información**

## **Philosophical Musings on the Underbelly of Information Age**

**Meditaciones filosóficas sobre las entrañas de la Era de la Información**

**Reflexões filosóficas sobre o ponto fraco da era da informação**

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### **Abstract**

There is an underbelly of the Age of Information. Its opportunities and promises have been diverted to dubious ends, manipulating the users of information technologies for economic rewards and political power. Drawing and extrapolating on previous and current research, we pose different ways to characterize the Age of Information as the Age of Plato's Cave-Dwellers (inspired by Plato and Aristotle), the Age of Distraction (inspired by Heidegger), the Age of Disinformation (inspired by the manipulation of internet content to provoke information-disinformation wars), the Age of Surveillance Capitalism (inspired by information technology companies' use of software and apps to manipulate consumer behavior), and the Age of Inflamed Grievances (inspired by the use of internet sites and apps to solidify and inflame partisan political grievances so as to maintain, gain or manipulate political power). The last two pose the greatest dangers to the destruction of democracies, countries and the planet.

**Keywords:** THE AGE OF DISINFORMATION; THE AGE OF DISTRACTION; THE AGE OF THE ANTI-ENLIGHTENMENT; THE AGE OF SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM; THE AGE OF INFLAMED GRIEVANCES.

### **Resumen**

Este trabajo representa una mirada reflexiva a las entrañas de la Era de la Información. Sus oportunidades y promesas han sido desviadas a dudosos finales, manipulando a los usuarios de las tecnologías de la información hacia recompensas económicas y poder político. El análisis desde la investigación previa y en curso, permite identificar diferentes maneras de caracterizar la Era de la Información como la Era de la Caverna de Platón (inspirada por Platón y Aristóteles), la Era de la Distracción (inspirada por Heidegger), la Era de la Desinformación (inspirada por la manipulación de los contenidos de Internet para

provocar guerras de información y desinformación), la Era del Capitalismo Vigilante (inspirada por el uso que hacen las compañías de tecnologías de la información, de programas informáticos y aplicaciones para manipular el comportamiento de los consumidores), y la Era de los Agravios Exacerbados (inspirada por el uso de los sitios web de Internet y las aplicaciones, para consolidar e inflamar los agravios políticos partisanos, así como para mantener, conquistar o manipular el poder político). Las últimas dos plantean los más grandes peligros para la destrucción de las democracias, los países y el planeta.

**Palabras clave:** LA ERA DE LA DESINFORMACIÓN; LA ERA DE LA DISTRACCIÓN; LA ERA DE LA ANTI-ILUMINACIÓN; LA ERA DEL CAPITALISMO VIGILANTE; LA ERA DE LOS AGRAVIOS EXACERBADOS.

### **Resumo**

Há um ponto fraco da Era da Informação. As suas oportunidades e promessas têm sido desviadas para fins duvidosos, manipulando os utilizadores das tecnologias de informação para recompensas económica e poder político. Baseando-nos em pesquisas anteriores e atuais, colocamos diferentes formas de caracterizar a Era da Informação como a Era das Cavernas de Platão (inspirada por Platão e Aristóteles), a Era da Distração (inspirada por Heidegger), a Era da Desinformação (inspirada pela manipulação do conteúdo da Internet para provocar guerras de informação-desinformação), a Era do Capitalismo de Vigilância (inspirada pelo uso de software e aplicações das empresas de tecnologia de informação para manipular o comportamento dos consumidores), e a Era das Inflamadas Reclamações (inspirada pelo uso de sites e aplicações da Internet para solidificar e inflamar as reclamações políticas partidárias de modo a manter, ganhar ou manipular o poder político). Os dois últimos representam os maiores perigos para a destruição das democracias, dos países e do planeta.

**Palavras-chave:** IDADE DA DESINFORMAÇÃO; IDADE DA DISTRACÇÃO; IDADE DO ANTI-ILUMINAÇÃO; IDADE DO CAPITALISMO DE VIGILÂNCIA; IDADE DAS QUEIXAS INFLAMADAS.

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There has been a paradigmatic shift with the emergence of the Age of Information, built upon the speed, sophistication, miniaturization and widespread availability of computer technology and the networks that allow quick and easy access to all sorts of information from all sorts of sources. No one doubts the benefits of such an evolution. What we now realize is that with these benefits

come with a deluge of problematic consequences that threaten the survival of democracy, countries, the world and the planet. We consider alternative names for the Age of Information, each of which displays something of the character of its dark side.

### **1. Prolegomena: The Age of Plato's Cave Dwellers**

Before tracking Plato's contribution to understanding the current age, we need to sort out different kinds of beliefs. Beliefs come in three general types: (1) true beliefs, (2) beliefs that are preferences, being neither true nor false, and (3) false beliefs. "True belief" is a belief that could be turned into knowledge (or which can be justified) through experience, education or research, such as seeking evidence from reliable sources. If one did not know that the hypotenuse of a right triangle is the square root of the sum of its sides squared, one could take a course in geometry to learn it. If one believes that Pizzagate is a fake news story, one can do the research using reliable sources for confirming that assessment. If I think that Juan Diego Flórez is a better opera tenor than Jonas Kaufmann, that may be true for one person and not others. Matters of taste, for which one can make arguments, are never true per se. They are matters of preferential beliefs that will vary among individuals or groups, even though one can advance arguments for why one would prefer one over the other. There are "false beliefs," e.g., climate change denial, which cannot be converted into truth. Some false beliefs are often tried to be portrayed as truth through appeals to false arguments, false or selective experts, faulty data collection or manipulation, or false evidence.

With that background in mind, one can consider Plato's Metaphor of the Line. He takes a line and divides into two parts, the upper part being knowledge, being subdivided into the forms (e.g., justice, truth, beauty, equality) and mathematical knowledge. The lower part of the line is the general area of opinion, which is subdivided into belief and imagining. The focus for this research will be on the bottom half of the line. Belief is focused on the world of perception, physical objects, where we accept sensory perceptions as givens. Imagining undermines physical reality, where dwellers live in some sort of alternate reality.

Opinion (*doxa*) is the lower part of the line. According to Plato, some kinds of opinions could be converted into genuine information or knowledge. While there are various interpretations about what Plato meant or whether it was justified, in his *Theaetetus*, Socrates suggested that knowledge is justified true belief (201 c-d). For example, one may believe that the area of a circle is equal to  $\pi r^2$  (pi times the radius squared) and then prove it (at which point it becomes knowledge) (see the slave experiment in *Meno*, 82b-85b). Some opinion cannot be so converted: e.g., a belief in the "best movie of the past year" or the "best political novel." Information specialists or librarians try to promote opinions (*δόξα* - *doxa*) as information – and within these, we hope at least to provide "right opinion" or the orthodoxy (*ὀρθοδοξία*, *orthodoxia* – "right opinion") that we hope will lead to some version of truth(s). The orthodoxy, to resurrect a not so common word, is the "knowledge" of a subject according to the prevailing paradigm of that subject, generally built on the consensus of its experts.

Imagining is a distorted perception of the sensible world. It is not hard to relate this state with the beliefs of many citizens in contemporary culture, for example, persons who believe in QAnon or that Trump was a competent strategist in handling the coronavirus pandemic. Plato's lowest category may be likened to a cognitive state where all fake news is accepted as fact. Understanding false beliefs or imaginings in the world of misinformation and disinformation, however, might be further elucidated by using Plato's Allegory of the Cave (Plato, *Republic*, 514a–520a).

Socrates describes a situation that takes place in a dark cave. A number of prisoners have lived in this deep cave since birth, never seeing the light of day, and are physically constrained in such a way that they cannot look to either side or behind them. Behind them is a fire, and behind the fire is a low wall, from behind which various objects are lifted into the air manipulated by another group of people, who are out of sight behind the wall. The fire casts shadows of the objects across the wall facing the prisoners. The prisoners watch the sequences that the shadows play out and play games predicting the sequences and sounds that reverberate in the cave. When they refer to one of the shadows as a "chair" for example, they are not actually seeing a chair, but rather the shadow of a chair,

confusing its shadowy appearance with actual reality. Because of their condition and constraints, they believe their perceptions are the most real things in the world. They are so convinced of the reality of their context, they mock anyone who would make claims otherwise.

As the allegory continues to be extrapolated, the prisoners are forced to come to see their actual condition, first by being shocked into an awareness of their condition, by becoming aware of the real source of the light (the fire and then the sun), seeing how things are as they are forced to move out of the cave; and second through a mid-wife (a la Socrates), letting them, through an interrogation, to come to understand for themselves, in a form of self-realization, their actual condition.

In the Platonic/Socratic view of true education, there are two aspects of the Socratic method of education. Socrates as a stingray, electric eel or gadfly (to which he is referred variously Platonic writings), shocking or numbing his interlocutors into an awareness of their ignorance as they are temporarily blinded by the light. The purpose of this shock is to clear away what one unidentified commentator referred to as "the conceit of false knowledge." It is a brilliant succinct description of the intent of the first aspect of the Socratic method. In the second aspect, Socrates plays a midwife – using questions skillfully to have his interlocutors come to a self-realization of their true condition, guiding them to the birth of their ideas.

This conversion process does not always succeed as many are secure in their state of ignorance; or they lack the wit to follow the logical conclusion of Socrates' questions. In current psychological jargon, they are victims of the Dunning-Kruger effect. They think that they are competent thinkers, but they lack critical thinking abilities that allow them to understand that there are alternate perceptions of reality or that their critical thinking abilities lack a foundation. They are unaware of what they are unaware and do not have the capacity to make themselves aware.

The Socratic method is prefaced, if you recall many of Plato's dialogs, with his profession of ignorance. His interlocutor in a dialog, e.g., Meno in the *Meno*, brings up a topic to be discussed, such as virtue. Socrates' response is an enthusiastic willingness to learn, because he professes that he has little or no

knowledge of the topic at hand. His profession of ignorance has been referred to as ironic, because in the end, his knowledge of the topic, as 'limited' as it is professed to be, turns out to be the most informed.

What is fascinating is the condition out of which education takes place from a Socratic perspective: the rise of "imaginings" or ignorance. This condition can help us understand contemporary world politics, especially in U. S. presidential politics. Not only are many supporters of Trump are likened to Cave Dwellers but also that they are happy with their condition and do not want to leave. And they mock those who would claim otherwise, claiming that the outsiders believe in fake news. The irony is that their reality is fake, and what is fake to them is reality. The question is how and why. During the current coronavirus pandemic, Trump has made claims for his managing the pandemic in the best possible way, that he had anticipated the pandemic, that there were enough tests and ventilators. All of these claims are verifiably false (by citing scientific evidence), but that does not seem to deter most of the viewers of *Fox News* (an ultra-right cable news propaganda machine) either to endorse his leadership or to ignore, dismiss or rationalize (e.g., he really did not mean what he said) some of his claims (e.g., to internally use bleach or disinfectant to cure the coronavirus).

It would seem that there is the cognition below imagining, where not only are false beliefs entertained, but they are proudly and loudly proclaimed as knowledge and any other sources or viewpoints are disavowed as fake news, that there is only one viewpoint, theirs, for which no claims or evidence will render it problematic. It is where the weak willfully subject themselves to the strong, just as many female Trump supporters find no problem offering themselves for his sexual satisfaction. In another example, Trump supporters have screamed about their civil rights when asked to wear a mask mandated by the store in which they want to do some shopping. Their civil rights are neither civil (they ignore the general health of the public) nor a right (their rights only extend to the point where their rights impinge on the rights of others – i.e., in one's minimizing the general public's exposure to the coronavirus). They themselves are living in a fake reality. According to them, their fake reality is their only reality. Not only that they are addicted to that reality because news sources like *Fox News* inflames their

grievances and stokes them to get them addicted to one news source that keeps feeding their biases, a process that we will elucidate later. Plato could not have anticipated the sophistication of technologies to use psychology against the common good.

The communication among the prisoners has been enhanced. The cave has been extended and enlarged throughout the world. They can not only talk to one another, but in the current world, but also can create a misinformation disinformation ecology whereby news sources, like-minded friends, neighbors, political associates and religious leaders all make and reinforce the same talking points, memes, narratives and propaganda.

A somewhat confusing scenario needs to be sorted out: what information, disinformation or misinformation consumers receive is information that pretends to be knowledge, even if second-hand knowledge, and that may be claimed to be knowledge by the consumer, based on their belief in a cognitive authority (such as a political leader, religious leader, political organization or news organization) and yet which is at best in the consumer's mind second-hand knowledge that may be in actuality belief and even false belief, or in line with Plato's notion of imagining. Many Trump supporters are now enslaved to their inflamed biases, way better than any Goebbels could have ever imagined – they have chosen to be enslaved and stoked in their biases. They would scream and punch any Socrates that would force them out of the Cave.

One might think that if one used the Socratic educational techniques, benumbing and midwifery, one might be able to make progress. Consider Plato's *Meno*, where Meno meets Socrates on the street and enthusiastically wants to tell him about what virtue, “knowledge” that he derived from his Sophist teachers. Socrates is pleased with Meno's offer, professing a lack of knowledge on the subject. By interrogating Meno through questions, the definitions that Meno offers are demolished one after another, such that Meno is stung into an awareness of his real ignorance on the subject matter, but not much liking to be embarrassed about his ignorance. He had been parroting the talking points of his teachers, the Sophists, who were unable to ground them in a real understanding of what virtue was. When Meno is challenged, he cannot pull out of himself any groundwork for

understanding what it is. In a pique of self-righteousness he challenges Socrates with a sophistic dilemma (an argument that appears to be correct, but is not). It is specious reasoning (in other words sophistry – derived from sophia (wisdom) but corrupted by the Sophists). The dilemma is that if you know something, you know you know and therefore, there is no need to inquire because you already know it. If you do not know something, there is no need to inquire, because even if you fell upon an answer, you would not recognize it because you don't know what you are looking for. Socrates points out the problem – the problem of knowledge is not a matter of either/or, because there is a third state, opinion in which you sort of know something but do not know it for sure.

In the current environment, the nature of what is true, what is false and what is a matter of opinion is at stake. In fact, it has been pushed to the extreme in what one person knows is unassailable and what your opponent knows is a hoax or fake news. This strategy parades in false equivalences: each opinion is equally valid as any other opinion. But we know this claim to be false. Some opinions are true beliefs that can be grounded in reality; other opinions have no such grounding. Trump supporters and their media assert that many things are true based on their pseudo-cognitive authorities but are not grounded in facts or evidence, such as, that the coronavirus is a hoax, that Trump did a wonderful job in handling it, etc. Not only that, but that they assert that all other perceptions or information sources are fake, that their skewed perceptions of reality are the only ones. In the current world, there appear to be two types of persons, those open to genuine learning, such as Meno's slave who came to understand how to double the size of a square, following the midwifery of Socrates to have him come to realize a mathematical truth in himself. But the Trump supporters are not only unwilling to learn but condemn others who have an alternate or enlarged notion of reality. In contemporary issues, any attempts to train them with information literacy, media literacy or digital literacy is a waste of time, so closed off are they to any learning, just as Meno cannot cope with Socrates's queries and stomps away frustrated.

To make another Platonic allusion, Trump and the current Republican party are like Callicles and Gorgias in the *Gorgias*, self-absorbed, rapacious, amoral political realists. The *Gorgias* is a dialog replete with themes echoed in the Age of



Information and the nature of political control by the rich and powerful over the governed. It contrasts the life of the manipulative politician, like Gorgias whose serves “superior” pleasures and the philosopher like Socrates that serves the good. The dialog's theme is rhetoric, the art of persuasion, and whether it is a true art or a false one, like flattery or a knack. Socrates suggests that it is knack or flattery because it convinces the ignorant rather than experts. Real art should strive to promote justice and the good of the people. Gorgias maintains that the orator should be able to convince the crowd on any subject, without regard to knowing anything about that subject. A rhetorical argument, he argues, should persuade a patient to take medicine, even though he is not a pharmacist. If he succeeds, he creates a belief in the patient (much in the manner of second-hand knowledge that we will discuss later). That belief can be founded (if the rhetorician knew what he was talking about, having the appropriate trustworthiness and expertise) or unfounded. Socrates's interaction with Callicles is the most engaging part of the dialog as it pits the life of the politician, Callicles, with that of a philosopher, Socrates, whose occupation Callicles insults. Their pursuits differ: Callicles' rule of the city, Socrates's pursuit of knowledge and the good, though Socrates doubts that he will ever attain full knowledge. Callicles suggests that there is no value to suffering and that it should be avoided. He wants to distinguish between man-made laws and nature. In his view, nature deems that the stronger should dominate the weaker and that only the weaker want laws to protect them. These superior politicians are “intelligent in the affairs of the city, and brave” (491e). But they do not need virtues of justice or moderation, and they deserve more than other citizens (491b). When Socrates asks of what these superior people deserve more, Callicles rejects the idea of more eating and drinking. Still, he can't say what kinds of things are desirable by superior people, but they should be held in higher regard. Socrates argues that the real politician does what is good for the state, not what the *hoi polloi* wants to hear.

Trump and his base supporters are on the side of Callicles, though his base is a subset of the governed, a subset living a filter bubble. They are flattered by his support of their biases (e.g., for white supremacy, against the liberal elites, for resentments and grievances about the lack of jobs or adequate income, due to

immigrants or the exportation of jobs to cheap-labor countries) and distortions about the balance of powers (Trump is a king and should have no constraints in preserving law and order) or the rule of law (as the mechanism of the rich to keep their position of power and wealth). Trump would agree that democracy is the tyranny of the many against the superior individual, one with a lot of power. Citizens should allow themselves to be ruled by these strong men (of which Trump fancies himself, as he alone can fix America's problems). Trump reflects and encourages his supporters' fear, grievances and anger at the status quo. However, the superiority of a Callicles seems to have a cleverness that Trump did not seem to be able to muster, given his incompetence in handling the coronavirus pandemic and his lack of any plans for that, healthcare, the infrastructure and job creation. Why should he and other superior individuals (e.g., government leaders, CEOs) still be regarded as superior? Why should they get a greater share? Like Callicles, their response is not clear. But for Republicans, it seems to be to retain and build the status quo, get more shares of money, have more political control, die with the best and most toys (homes, vacations, yachts, etc.) For what, more happiness? Pleasure without justice, in the end, will make one miserable unless one is numbed with an addiction (to money or power?). The only real thing that makes people happy is living well and doing well, within the constraints of justice (as suggested by Plato). Trump and the Republican party have shed any pretense of supporting democracy. They believe that the strong (the oligarchs, the wealthy, the powerful) should rule the weak. So they engage in voter suppression, vote suppression by making it difficult to register or get to the polls, gerrymandering to shape political districts to favor Republican election outcomes, and declaring that the Biden election was due to voter fraud. Lawsuits to curtail the right of citizens to vote, etc. They do not believe America is a democracy. On Twitter, Utah's Republican Senator Mike Lee commented that the U. S. is not actually a democracy because despite Democrats winning the popular vote in two elections, they did not win the electoral college (which no longer justly reflects the U.S. demographics). "Democracy isn't the objective; liberty, peace, and prosperity (sic) are. We want the human condition to flourish. Rank democracy can thwart that" (Wolf, 2020). Trump and many Republicans agree, arguing that they would stop losing elections if the popular vote prevailed. Laws should not be made to restrict

banks, giant corporations, and wealthy individuals from continuing to retain their privileges, which for them have become rights.

Following a reflection of Plato's approach to rhetoric, we can follow it with a sojourn into Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (Aristotle, 2020). Aristotle discusses three types of appeals that a writer, author or speaker should use as a means of persuasion: ethos, logos and pathos (Aristotle, 2020, Chapter II). An argument from ethos or a character approach relies on how trustworthy or credible an author, speaker or a writer is and what expertise they bring to a subject, message or theme. They need to have relevant experience and a good reputation. If they are not known, their character is created through the text of the message, its tone, style and approach to the subject matter through different perspectives. In this case writer, author or speaker connect their arguments with the audience's own set of views and values.

In contemporary jargon, we might refer to the speaker, author or writer as a cognitive authority. What is a cognitive authority? When one lacks experience, education, or knowledge, or does not have the time or inclination to acquire such, a cognitive authority is a person, organization, media source, group, or leader whose information one takes as second-hand knowledge based on that entity's credibility, trustworthiness, and reliability. This author extends the notion of cognitive authority from Patrick Wilson's book, *Second-hand Knowledge: An Inquiry into Cognitive Authority* (Wilson, 1983). For an more elaborate treatment see four papers by the author, especially the latest one: "A not-so-brief account of current information ethics: the ethics of ignorance, missing information, misinformation, disinformation and other forms of deception or incompetence," (Froehlich 2017), "The role of pseudo-cognitive authorities and self-deception in the dissemination of fake news," (Froehlich, 2019), "Ten lessons for the age of disinformation," (Froehlich, 2020) and "A Disinformation-Misinformation Ecology: The Case of Trump," (in press). In the last two papers, I establish how there are false cognitive authorities that pretend to be genuine authorities but lack the necessary credentials and foundation. It would be helpful to contrast a legitimate cognitive authority from a fake one. For example, we will use a set of tables, contrasting *The New York Times* with *Fox News*.

*Table 1: What Viewers/Readers/Audiences Believe*

<b>New York Times</b>	<b>Fox News</b>
Center-left bias (mediabiasfactcheck.com) Because they have a bias does not mean that their reporting is not grounded in facts.	Strongly right bias (mediabiasfactcheck.com) Because they have a bias does not mean that their reporting is not grounded in facts.
Trustworthy "captures the perceived goodness and morality of the source" (Rieh, 2010, p. 1337).	Trustworthy "captures the perceived goodness and morality of the source" (Rieh, 2010, p. 1337).
Possesses expertise: they provide information that is accurate and valid	Possesses expertise; they provide information that is accurate and valid
Real News	Real News (but other sources are Fake News)

*Table 2: New York Times: Actuality*

<b>New York Times</b>	<b>Basis for their Authority</b>
Center-left bias (mediabiasfactcheck.com)	Having a political leaning does not invalidate the content, particularly because opinion articles are published as opinion
Trustworthy "captures the perceived goodness and morality of the source" (Rieh, 2010, p. 1337).	Long history (1851) as a respected publication. Articles are well-researched and verified. Opinion is identified as opinion (e.g., editorials).
Possesses expertise: they provide information that is accurate and valid	Produces (1) second-hand knowledge, (2) well-informed opinion (with which other may disagree: e.g., Trickle-down economics is not successful), and (3) preferences (best movies to watch)
	Has a cadre of respected and experienced experts. When they become aware of false or problematic statements or reporting, they issue retractions
	Believe in fact-finding and verification by multiple sources
Adheres to the Principles of Good Journalism ( <a href="https://americanpressassociation.com/principles-of-journalism/">https://americanpressassociation.com/principles-of-journalism/</a> )	The obligation to present the truth (or the best representation thereof, by providing evidence and upgrading narrative as facts and errors emerge)
NY Times follows these principles	Its first loyalty is to citizens, not to partisan politics
For a measured assessment, see: <a href="https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/new-york-times/">https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/new-york-times/</a>	Practitioners must maintain an independence of those they cover – when covering anything connected to the NY Times, they note it
	Serve as an independent monitor of power – they don't fall prey to party or administration favoritism
	Must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise – all sides of an issue are striven to be portrayed and balanced

	Must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant
	Must keep the news interesting and proportional. This means that one does not sensationalize certain events and ignore others, stereotyping or being overly negative – all affected communities and perspectives must be taken in account.
	Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience. Opinions of editorialists and reporters reflect an ethical framework.

Compare this table with the table for Fox News:

*Table 3: Fox News: Actuality*

<b>Fox News</b>	<b>Basis for their Authority</b>
Strong right bias (mediabiasfactcheck.com). For a measured assessment see: <a href="https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/fox-news/">https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/fox-news/</a>	Having a political leaning does not invalidate the content, particularly because opinion pieces are published as opinion. Unfortunately, their political position is reflected in what are supposed to be factual observations, what they say and what they omit.
They claim that they are trustworthy implying that they stand for "the perceived goodness and morality of the source" (Rieh, 2010, p. 1337).	It has a long history associated with right and conservative causes, a history which has been often shaky and scandalous, with commentators leaving (e.g., Bill O'Reilly) for various reasons, often sexual harassment. (Stelter, 2020; Smith, 2019). Sometimes their sources are conspiracy theories taken from alt-right web sites.
Possesses expertise: they purport to provide information that is accurate and valid	They have various pundits, Sean Hannity, Tucker Carlson, Jeanine Pirro, Neil Cavuto, et al., who claim to be experts, but they are mostly apologists for ring-wing viewpoints. Its second-hand knowledge on political matters is often at best opinion or opinion based on alternative "facts" or misconstrued data. Lou Dobbs praised Trump for being nominated for a "Noble" Prize, omitting the fact that anyone can nominate anyone for a Nobel Prize and that the nominator was a far-right Norwegian with an ax to grind about immigration to Norway (Harvey, 2020).
The obligation to present the truth (or the best representation thereof, by providing evidence and upgrading narrative as facts and errors emerge)	For four straight months, they pushed misinformation every single day (Sullivan, 2019). Trump's failure or incompetence in dealing with the coronavirus epidemic is never mentioned, and in fact, he is praised for his superior leadership.
Its first loyalty is to citizens	Their loyalty is toward its partisan viewers, not to all citizens, though they hope to convert them.

<p>Practitioners must maintain an independence of those they cover</p>	<p>The most obvious case is that of Donald Trump. They never criticize his speech or behavior and claim he is the best president that the US has ever had. He frequently is invited or invites himself for interviews. Their relationship is so close that Fox News is often referred to as "Trump TV."</p>
<p>Serve as an independent monitor of power</p>	<p>See the above; most commentary and commentators support right-wing causes: unfettered capitalism, oligarchy, pro-business, anti-labor agenda, etc. They endorse the Republican party and the Trump agenda, often ignoring previous principles of conservatism (e.g., anti-communism, fiscal responsibility).</p>
<p>Must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise</p>	<p>They rarely invite speakers, politicians or commentators from the Democrats or the left. They also refuse to run advertisements that are critical of the president or right-wing agenda</p>
<p>Must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant</p>	<p>They are committed to reporting or making narratives that support the biases of their viewers, a right-wing or conservative viewpoint (which has been muddled).</p>
<p>Must keep the news interesting and proportional. This means that one does not sensationalize certain events and ignoring others, stereotyping or being overly negative – all affected communities and perspectives must be taken in account.</p>	<p>They are often committed to sensationalism, such as fear of migrants, fear of communism and socialism, turning peaceful protests into riots against law and order, etc. For an overview of a variety of issues, see: <a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fox_News_controversies">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fox_News_controversies</a></p>
<p>Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience.</p>	<p>When reporting, one should include their viewpoint reflecting their own moral conscience. Certainly, many of Fox News pundits do so: Sean Hannity, Tucker Carlson, Jeanine Pirro, Neil Cavuto, et al. take that view, but there are serious questions about a moral compass that approves of children in cages, that support a continuous liar (20,000+ lies or misleading information until July 13, 2020 (<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/07/13/president-trump-has-made-more-than-20000-false-or-misleading-claims/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/07/13/president-trump-has-made-more-than-20000-false-or-misleading-claims/</a>) or ignore, hide or manipulate relevant information.</p>

By any rational assessment, *Fox News* is a false or pseudo cognitive authority. It is not that *Fox News* is the only false cognitive authority in the ultra-right echo system. There are many social media sites on the internet that also play that role. But *Fox News* is a major source. It persists as a reliable source of information to many information consumers, especially Republicans. A study Pew Research Center undertook in the fall of 2019 provides an analysis of how *Fox News* influences the American public. It concluded:

1. Around four-in-ten Americans trust *Fox News*. Nearly the same share distrust it.
2. Republicans [(2/3) and Republican-leaning independents (65%)] trust *Fox News* more than any other outlet. Democrats distrust it more than any other outlet.
3. On an ideological scale, the average *Fox News* consumer is to the right of the average U.S. adult, but not as far to the right as the audiences of some other outlets [Such as Rush Limbaugh and Alex Jones.]
4. People who cite *Fox News* as their main source of political news are older and more likely to be white than U.S. adults overall.
5. Those who name *Fox News* as their main source of political news stand out from the general public in their views on key issues and people, including President Donald Trump. (Gramlich, 2020)

How is it possible? It is possible because these kinds of Trump supporters live in a "closed propaganda loop," (Benkler et al., 2018) where they interact within the same disinformation-misinformation ecology, where each element (like minded news sources, political party, political leaders, religious leaders, peers and associates) echo and reinforce one another, and where they are conditioned to believe that all other news sources and social media sites are "fake news." They fall prey to confirmation bias, among many others (e.g., stereotyping bias, the availability heuristic, attentional bias, illusory truth, affect bias), all of which precondition *Fox News* viewers and other alt-right propaganda sites to accept their content uncritically. Confirmation bias is a common one. Confirmation bias involves interpreting information that supports one's existing beliefs, even when presented with conflicting evidence. Trump supporters hold all sorts of improbable beliefs because they concord with their preexisting beliefs: e.g., that Trump was a great president; he was successful in curbing the coronavirus, its infection, and death rate; he cares about poor people; he is draining the Washington swamp; he is a great businessman; that his tax cuts helped all Americans; and that he has an excellent plan for healthcare, all of which are false. Not only do they engage a confirmation bias, but also a disconfirmation bias "in

which we expend disproportionate energy trying to debunk or refute views and arguments that we find uncongenial." (Mooney, 2011).

Returning to Aristotle, Trump's supporters would appear to believe that the kinds of arguments presented to them belong to ethos, which relies on how trustworthy or credible an author, speaker or writer is, and what expertise they bring to a subject or theme. The viewers or audience believe that those speakers, authors or writers have relevant experience and a good reputation. Despite the flawed nature of *Fox News* pundits, they claim to be credible and have the expertise (despite evidence to the contrary). Their pundits connect their arguments with the audience's own set of views and values (even as they create and shape many of them).

In actuality, their arguments are from pathos, arguments that draw on the audience's or viewer's emotions, sympathies, interests, and/or biases. In this case, the audience is solicited to identify with the speaker, author, writer or messenger – to feel or experience what the speaker, author, or messenger feels. It is often engaged by pundits who stoke the fear or anger of its viewers, message receivers, et al., culminating in moral outrage and self-righteousness over events, memes and narratives that oppose their established beliefs.

Aristotle's third type of rhetorical argument does not seem to apply in this disinformation ecology because it relies on the clarity of the message's claim, logic, and the supporting evidence. The audience or viewers should follow a clear progression of ideas backed up with reasonable and appropriate details. Yet, in this disinformation ecology, some think that the arguments that *Fox News* presents are from logic and evidence. But, the logic is one that supports their viewers' biases and the evidence is cherry-picked from available data or like-minded selected sources and contrary evidence is omitted or ignored. This failure to be critical seems to be the consequence, as mentioned earlier, of the Dunning Kruger effect in which individuals overestimate the truth of their opinions and their critical thinking abilities, and underestimate the soundness of their beliefs.

It is clear that Fox News is a false cognitive authority that spreads false messages to its devotees (conditioned by, appealing to and enhancing the cognitive biases of its viewers). It dovetails with the research of Rafael Capurro in "Pseudoangelia –



Pseudoangelos: On False Messages and Messengers in Ancient Greece” (Capurro, 2020). False cognitive authorities and false messages have been as old as man. If we take Genesis literally, Eve was tempted by the first false messenger (pseudo-cognitive authority), the serpent, with the first false message that it conveyed when she told it that she was not allowed to eat of the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden. “And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil. (King James Bible, 2017, Genesis 3:4-5). It turned out to be the first case of paltering, because Adam and Eve did come to know good and evil after disobeying God, but the devil did manage not to explain all the consequences that would come with having self-consciousness. There are some correspondences between the trustworthiness of messengers and reliability of messages in ancient Greece and the criteria of cognitive authorities detailed above which are expertise, (i.e., it increases a person’s perception that a source is able to provide information that is accurate and valid (Rieh, 2010, 1337-1138)) and trustworthiness (i.e., the sources of the information are perceived to be good and they exist within an ethical framework, one at least that comports with the orthodoxy (Rieh, 2010, 1337)). Capurro cites Lewis concerning the criteria for evaluating the news and the messenger as trustworthy: (1) identity (credentials), (2) class (status), (3) autopsy (eye-witness), (4) motive (financial gain, official herald) (Capurro, 2020, 113). The context is different (*polis* versus nation-states, such as the United States) and the notion of what is news differs between the ancients and moderns. There is no word for news as such in Greece, Lewis asserts, but is related to the word for report (Capurro, 2020, 111). With that caveat in mind, identity or credentials can be seen to map to expertise. Class maps to social strata, which is mixed in contemporary societies (different levels of message receivers exist in different societies and countries). Most information sources in contemporary society claim access to eyewitnesses unless they are the eyewitnesses; this property maps to both trustworthiness and expertise, because the source of the information is perceived to be good and the source of the information is thought to provide accurate information. In both modern and ancient societies, there is an interest in financial gain (e.g., make profits from the news), but whether it represents an official herald depends on the

context (an authentic context or inauthentic context), but the intention includes maintaining or gaining power or political influence. We can continue the contrast of *Fox News* and the *New York Times* mentioned above, as messengers or cognitive authorities, dispensing true or false messages to their political clients. The *New York Times* has strong credentials reporting reliable information (messages) for close to 150 years, correcting their reporting when appropriate, despite a center-left bias. It has achieved an important status in a democratic society, and provides reliable information for mostly an educated class. It either plays the expert or pays for experts or uses expert witnesses to support their reports (messages). They seek financial compensation for providing reliable news, but also want to serve as an independent monitor of power. *Fox News*, on the other hand, does have an identity and credentials: its identity and credentials are as a conservative news source, though its viewpoint has declined into a source of propaganda for Trump and an alt-right agenda, in which conservatism has moved from fiscal responsibility to fiscal irresponsibility and from rejection of foreign interference to encouraging relationships with dictators. They are not an independent monitor of power, but promote and inflate the power of Trump and his political party, the GOP having become the Trump party. It has achieved a status among conservative circles, because it panders to their fears or grievances, either real, imagined or inflamed. Its use of eyewitnesses is frequently dishonest: for example, to continue to establish the false message that the coronavirus was overrated, Fox News pundit, Tucker Carlson, on April 27, 2020 argued against the lockdowns imposed by medical authorities by appealing two “experts,” Drs. Dan Erickson and Artin Massihi, who claimed that the lockdown was excessive, that it undercut economic activity, especially the ability to make an income, and impinged on the rights of citizens to freely associate. Their research has been discredited by reputable researchers and research organizations – there were statistical errors in their research and there is contravening evidence of thousands of genuine medical experts (LeTourneau, 2020). Its motives are quite clear, to make a lot of money (Fox News makes \$2 billion dollars per year (Stelter, 2020, p. 20)) and it promotes a very right political agenda, in order to maintain power (trying to have Trump remain as president) and/or to gain power. In “A disinformation-misinformation ecology: the case of Trump” (Froehlich, 2020),

this author analyzes the different strata of the Trump ecology – those at the top who want retain power and political influence and those at the bottom that want their inflamed grievances appeased. Fox News is a rumor mill, sometimes creating conspiracy theories or spreading conspiracy theories taken from alt-right web sites, but to a specialized group, whose members that live in a closed propaganda feedback loop. They are a kind of *polis*, a city within the nation, whose boundaries are set by a misinformation-disinformation ecology of like-minded news sources, like-minded political leaders, religious leaders, colleagues, friends, associates, and partisans, enveloped in social and collective self-deception and rejecting any sources that do not conform to the beliefs within their filter bubble.

The difference between the wiles of rumor in Capurro’s paper and in contemporary culture is that the nature of the group within which the rumors circulate or take hold and the nature of the rumors that are circulated. In the polis, the rumors were echoed through the class structure and the nature of the rumor is related to the political structure of the *polis* and external events. Within the closed propaganda feedback loop there are circulated conspiracy theories where authority, message, messenger, ingroup, eyewitness and motive reinforce each other and outlaw other rumors (such as authentic news). They are methods of trickery in the InfoWars or rather the wars of disinformation against authentic information, expertise and humanism, that turn genuine information and expertise into a culture war (such as defending the use of hydroxychloroquine as a treatment against Covid-19, a method debunked by medical authorities). The rumors of the filter bubble in which they exist can be quite fantastic, such as those of QAnon who hold that Trump is their savior from Democrats and liberal elites who are involved in the sex-trafficking of children and the murder of children to extend the life of the elites (Wong, 2020), or those that believe the election was stolen from Trump. Sidney Powell, a lawyer for Trump advanced claims of huge voter fraud and a rigged election, by claiming a supercomputer called Hammer hacked votes, that Trump won the election by “millions of votes,” and that Dominion Voting Systems, the voting software company, changed the tallies in favor of Biden (Qiu, 2020). There is no evidence for such a claim and yet it was

circulated and amplified and accepted in the misinformation-disinformation ecology as genuine information, only genuine for false messengers such as *Fox News* dispensing false messages, e.g., that Trump won the election. There is only one subtext for most of the rumors: the sowing of discord and divisiveness, fulfilling the dream of Russian chicanery, the destruction of American democracy. Such chicanery is part and parcel of the Age of Distraction.

## **2. The Age of Distraction**

We are all born into a world in a specific context at a specific time. As we grow up, we are given a set of perceptions and told what perceptions are important, are given interpretations about those perceptions, including emotional valences. As the Heideggerian (Heidegger, 2010, Section 38) metaphor indicates, we are born in a state of fallenness, a state where we are absorbed into the world in its everydayness. While man in his essence is care and openness to being, he is stifled by our culture and society. Such fallenness into the world is manifested in everyday things, in idle talk or gossip, the endless search for curiosity, and living in ambiguity, something akin to Sartre's bad faith, in which one manages to live life believing what one does not believe and avoiding responsibility for one's life choices (which are held as not-choices).

Idle talk or gossip means more than just talking about tweets, sports or the weather. Any speaking or writing does not open one's possibilities to becoming one's specific authentic self but constricts them. It is talk that does not involve thinking. It is an uncritical, unexamined way of talking about facts and information while failing to use language to understand what is actually happening critically. People merely repeat everything they have heard about the subject under discussion (whether information or disinformation) and use that understanding to justify their approach to the topic. In accepting opinions or "knowledge" that they believe are common to everyone, they seek conformity in thought and action. This disposition is characteristic of all human beings in their everydayness; we interpret things in terms of what we believe is orthodoxy or customary. How does this work for those living in a "closed propaganda loop" (Benkler et al., 2018)? It is not that they are living in the ordinary. They have

resolutely decided to stay not only in the ordinary but also in ignorance – they've been chosen or enticed into being permanent and resolute dwellers of Plato's Cave. Inside of a disinformation ecology, their "understanding" is based on the "they" of their like-minded sources, cognitive authorities, friends, political ideology (not that their individual grievances are the same, but they participate somewhere in a partisan framework or filter bubble) with a commitment so strong that no adverse information is allowed to enter and any Socrates would be executed, not because Socrates offended the orthodoxy (e.g., as in Athenian democracy) or because he offended not the unorthodox, but that he questioned the anti-orthodox, where alt-right partisans live (though they live in a kind of orthodoxy, where the rightness of their opinions are tied to their biases)>

To say that curiosity is one of the aspects of fallenness seems odd at first. Heidegger's notion of curiosity is not to be taken in the usual sense, but the ongoing fascination with the new. Situated within our ordinary, everyday existence, one is swept along by an endless quest for what is new, a quest that is endless. One seeks endless stimulation rather than focusing one's energies on meaningful action that will help one determine one's purpose in life. "They" (society, culture, the Zeitgeist, Silicon Valley Tech companies, Facebook "likes") beckon us to seek more and more novelty, to grab our attention. How does that work in the disinformation ecology? In the disinformation ecology, the partisans seek more, different and new sources to feed their grievances, resentment, fear or anger in opposition to others not embracing their position. Driven by self-righteousness or to bolster their self-deception and social self-deception, they seek to find new and more "evidence" about the rightness of their position and their confirmation bias from *Fox News*, like-minded news sources and partisan-minded sites on the internet have a lot to offer, such as Breitbart, Truthfeed, and certain feeds or sources on Facebook, YouTube, including click-bait, or other sources.

Ambiguity is the third feature of fallenness. In the sphere of everydayness (what we typically do day by day in conformity with what we think is expected of us), one chatters about the latest trends, what is fashionable, what is the most engaging entertainment, what video streams to binge on, whose tweeting about what, etc. Living in ambiguity represents a loss of any sensitivity to the distinction between

genuine understanding and superficial chitchat; it is to fall prey to whatever explanation "they" offer. There is no attempt to get to a real understanding of one's self, one's goals, or one's position in society or the world, let any significant contribution to it. In the disinformation ecology, consumers of the propaganda feedback loop or those living in a filter bubble, are restricted to "understanding" in terms of conformity with the memes, narratives and tropes of *their* crowd, *their* party, *their ingroup*, *their* news channels, *their* social media sites, and *their* cognitively authorized propaganda. They live in the ambiguity of being right about their being right (arrogant self-reinforcing self-righteousness), yet subconsciously knowing that they live in a prison of biases and resentments.

While Heidegger (1962) established his philosophy almost a century ago (*Being and Time* was published in 1927), he well anticipated what we might well call the Age of Distraction. Our technology feeds and solicits us with constant streams of information and amusements to which to pay attention, billions of facts, products, entertainments or events of whatever character. Recalling Neil Postman's prescient book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, we now have streaming services with which we can occupy ourselves with an almost infinite lifetimes of movies, television series, opera, any form of audio, video, photography, scents, texts, tactile experiences, all lavish intoxications for the senses, individually or combined. The origin of 'amuse' comes "from late 15c., 'to divert the attention, beguile, delude,' from Old French amuser' fool, tease, hoax, entrap; make fun of,' literally 'cause to muse' (as a distraction)." (<https://www.etymonline.com/word/amuse>). Granting that there are pieces of art that teach us about ourselves and the world, it is not clear that how much of such beguiling, hoaxes or entrapments help us understand ourselves, our world or our roles better, but to distract us into streams of diversions from one thing (latest fashion on Home Shopping Network) to another (latest gossip on entertainment television) and then another (email notification from a friend) to another (new technological gadget), a whirlwind of contrivances to occupy our time and divert from boredom. We have Google, which can supply data for most trivial of our questions (but anything beyond the first page of results does not count for it exceeds the user's attention span). We can consult Alexa to fill up any possible

vacuum in our lives with trivia, should we want – it continuously offers us games, factoids, and trifles to keep us amused, not that it can't help us move toward authenticity as well. Our cell phones constantly provide alerts about email, about the latest news, about calls from friends and solicitors, to the point of addiction (to which we will return shortly). While the original goal of this technology is to provide useful information, amusement, photography, among many other applications, it is also to make more profits for their creators, especially by expanding its use. This technology is not bad, but in our fallenness, it inclines us to fill the void avoiding the decisions to make meaning for our lives, our country, our world and our earth.

Given a partisan political obsession, this fallenness involves an ecology based on one's circumstances. This ecology predisposes the individual to a way of seeing and interpreting the world. Whether by conscious motivation (through "willful ignorance" or information avoidance), or unconscious motivation (through gullibility or cognitive bias), their receptivity to the world is restrained, and their everydayness is deformed. The "they" that drives their explanations are a few like-minded or like-promoting sources or cognitive authorities (like *Fox News* or 8chan or Rush Limbaugh, a radical-right-wing radio host). The ecology most likely flows with a mixture of information, disinformation, misinformation, and opinions, whether true, false, or a preference. While many partisan adherents may think that they are getting knowledge, they are getting at best second-hand knowledge and at worst false opinions. Their cognitive authorities are like the Sophists, who had the appearance of promoting knowledge or wisdom, but could not do so, so they became known for their sophistry. They appear to have memorized the key points (a la Meno) suited to their cognitive biases, but they cannot explain the information they get or provide genuine arguments. It satisfies them that Trump said so or *Fox News* said so or Breitbart said so because it supports their emotional triggers. The sophistic cognitive authorities fool themselves into thinking that their thinking is the only correct one and they think that they communicate it to their students, but they fail, for the students only memorize the opinions, memes or talking points but cannot provide any grounds for it. These authorities and their students come to deceive themselves about what

they "know." This self-deception is echoed and reaffirmed in like-minded friends, associates, neighbors, internet sources, religious or political leaders who dialectically reinforce each other's viewpoint leading to social and collective self-deception. In addition, there are cognitive authorities who reinforce these viewpoints and explicitly deny the validity of any other views. They enforce the idea that they and like-minded authorities are the sole sources of truth and that all competing authorities are to be rejected. What puts power into the self-reinforcing dialectic of each dimension is the repetition of the same message, not only from one source but also from multiple sources (the president, partisan legislators, cabinet members, and like-minded friends, neighbors, religious leaders, political pundits, web sites and sources). In such a way, does Heidegger anticipate the Age of Disinformation, another way of characterizing the underbelly of the Age of Information.

### **3. The Age of Disinformation**

The Age of Information has provided access to information throughout the world with the inventions of computers and networks that can share all sorts of information. However, it did not take time for disinformation and misinformation to wreak havoc on the internet, for all the good intentions for information-sharing turned to misinformation- or disinformation-sharing, mainly for political exploitation. The difference between misinformation and disinformation is that the latter is created with the specific intent to deceive. In many cases, it is not clear whether a piece of misinformation is just misinformation or disinformation because the intention may not be clear. This false information comes in various forms, paltering, lies, fake news, ignorance or attacks on credible 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 a right to 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."



In some respect, we have also 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 print or digital media, cable broadcasting or social media. The Enlightenment (roughly starting in the 18th century Europe) encompassed various ideas centered on reason as the primary source of authority and rightfulness, 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 United States Constitution and the structure of its government. In the current environment, individual liberty is now claimed to support partisan politics (e.g., only right partisan politics are true), to erase separation of church and state (e.g., America was established as a Christian nation), and to attack contravening reason and evidence, so as to support intolerance of those whose views are different from a right-partisan ideology. Not all aspects of the Enlightenment were positive, according to some thinkers. In fact, one Catholic 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, a Benedictine nun, 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 refusing to wear a mask when asked to do so for public health. According to them, individual civil rights trump any concern for the common good or public health. She has come to call it "toxic individualism" (Chittister, 2020). The notion of a public good has been currently challenged by the right, failing to see that, for example, education for all has benefits for all. Fake news sources are generated by various political actors to produce lies and disinformation. They are propagated through the internet and social media, stories uncritically gobbled up by adherents of a partisan position. They are clothed as alternative facts, making the notion of fact or evidence itself problematic. Science is denigrated if it does not concord with a political agenda.

Americans have been dying by the thousands for failing to adhere to experts' assessments on handling the coronavirus pandemic. Expertise of whatever character is not only challenged but rejected: real news, science, climate change, environmental issues, national security information, etc., are all said not to exist or be a hoax, and any contrary evidence is claimed to be fake. There is the loss of respect for expertise, the consequences of which Tom Nichols detailed in *The death of expertise: The campaign against established knowledge and why it matters* (2017). He is a national security professor at U. S. Naval War College, who looks at phenomena in higher education, technology, and the news media. Key points of his insights include: (1) We have moved into a world where we adhere to our values and reject evidence (as in the case of anti-vaxxers, who come from all levels of education). (2) Even educated people are prone to confirmation bias, mathematical illiteracy, and failure to understand the scientific method as an evolving, self-correcting process. (3). In academia, there has been a shift to the student as client or customer view, which raises two concerns: (a) while there may be some limited value in student assessment of teachers, it creates a "habit of mind in which the layperson becomes accustomed to judging the expert, despite being in an obvious position of having inferior knowledge of the subject material" (Nichols, 2017, p. 97) and (b) it also fosters the idea that

When feelings matter more than rationality of facts, education is a doomed exercise. Emotion is an unassailable defense against expertise, a moat of anger and resentment in which reason and knowledge quickly drown. And when students learn that emotion trumps everything else, it is a lesson they will take with them for the rest of their lives (Nichols, 2017, p. 99).

(c) Universities (and high schools) have inflated students' ideas of competence through grade inflation. (4) The use of Google and other search engines conflates information, knowledge, experience, fact and opinion, and reinforces that conflation. (5) Instantaneous communication with immediate response to queries fosters gut reactions to information and does not foster critical thinking. In response to that observation, I would suggest a slow-thinking movement in the same way that the slow food movement arose as a response to fast food. (6) In an ideology of democratic equality, experts are demeaned as elitists; on the other hand, because experts are smarter than others in certain subject areas, they often make the mistake of thinking that they are smarter than others in areas in which

they are not experts, which demeans their real expertise. (7) Universities are sacrificing their intellectual authority by activists that attack the traditions of free inquiry by opposing the presence of speakers on campus whom they deem are not politically correct (e.g., cancel culture). (8) Journalism itself contributes to the death of expertise:

Journalism is now sometimes as much a contributor to the death of expertise as it is a defense against it....

This fusing of entertainment, news, punditry, and citizen participation is a chaotic mess that does not inform people so much as it creates the illusion of being informed. Just as clicking through endless Internet pages makes people think they are learning new things, watching countless hours of television and scrolling through hundreds of headlines is producing laypeople who believe –erroneously—that they understand the news. Worse, their daily interaction with so much media makes them resistant to learning anything more that takes too long or isn't entertaining enough. (Nichols, 2017, pp. 137, 143).

(9) Journalism has morphed "news into entertainment [that] stretches across every demographic" (Nichols, 2017, p. 156). (10) Modern media is an exercise in confirmation bias: "This means that Americans are not just *poorly* informed, they're *misinformed*" (Nichols, 2017, p. 157). These two disorders are different. Citing a 2000 Pew Research Center study, uninformed citizens do not have access to information at all, and misinformed people reject evidence that does not accord with their belief system and seek data that harden their belief system. "And, of course, the most misinformed citizens' tend to be the most confident in their views and are also the strongest partisans" (Nichols, 2017, p. 157). The earlier analysis of Fox News confirms this assertion as being a long-standing purveyor of disinformation and misinformation where contrary to factual evidence, they have promoted Trump as an excellent president and where there is no critical evaluation of him. As a result, "Those who say they trust Fox most as a television news source are far more likely to approve of Trump than those who don't. In fact, nearly every Republican who most trusts Fox News says they approve of how Trump's faring as president (Bump, 2020)." In October 2020 survey, Fox News Republicans approved of Trump at around 97% and for all Republicans, it is 78% (Bump, 2020).

World War III has started. As much as one would like to rail against the disinformation and conspiracy theories of Alex Jones, he is right about one thing:

we are engaged in InfoWars, the title of his "news" program. To name it more correctly, they are the disinformation-information wars, where misinformation or disinformation trumps genuine information, where one's partisan opinions not only trumps what opposes it but also attempts to discredit it. In this respect, another name of the underbelly of the Age of Information is the Age of Disinformation-Information Wars. The first major salvo of WW III was InfoWar I, the 2016 election of Trump, echoed in other authoritarian countries in the world. The war is not trivial. It is a World War.

No matter what the country (e.g., Bolsonaro's election in Brasil), it is a battle for science, reason, evidence, expertise and fact (and humanism) to anchor political decision making, individually and collectively, and to save the planet from becoming uninhabitable. On the one side, we have cable news channels (e.g., Fox News, Sinclair Broadcasting), Russian trolls, conspiracy theorists, social media run amuck with "alternative facts," and a president, an administration, and a political party (i.e., the GOP) committed or consenting to the destruction of democratic norms, and the resurgence of racism, sexism, fascism, rampant corruption, climate denial, etc. On the other side, we have news channels (MSNBC – a center-left cable news channel), news organizations (*New York Times*), social media, an opposition party, a side that also sometimes degenerates into a negative force (e.g., cancel culture). There is a third party, the disengaged, who fails to be concerned (let alone understand) with the deterioration of American democracy, the climate crisis or the proper role the U. S. needs to play in the world. It is a war of disinformation, misinformation, lies, absent information, etc., against the evidence and truth, and for power and greed trolling simplistic solutions to complex problems. The sides are not balanced, for the one side (the right) spreads disinformation and actively challenges, abuses, and attacks those committed to truth, evidence, facts, and logic. It is not that we have two competing opinions (say that of Rachel Maddow of MSNBC versus Sean Hannity of *Fox News*) but a belief that declares its opposition to have no valid grounds, that in a supreme example of false equivalences, all opinions are equal, but the right's opinion outweighs all others, that all others are fake news. It is true to say that everyone is entitled to an opinion, but not all opinions are the same or

equivalent – some are grounded and others unfounded. The argument on the right is to insist they are the same, that the right's biases trump science, evidence, logic and facts. Science and advice from experts are treated as opinions in a political culture war. Of course, people on the left can exercise the same ploy (e.g., left-wing authoritarians), but research indicates that the strategy takes place more on the right than for the center or the left. Not only that, but Ingraham found that conservatives are more likely to fall for fake news stories than the left (Ingraham, 2019).

Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts published *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*, which shows that right and other media differ significantly in dealing with network information. By doing a rigorous analysis of online stories, tweets, and Facebook-shares data points, the authors conclude that "something very different was happening in right-wing media than in centrist, center-left and left-wing media." (Benkler et al., 2018, p. 14). They observe that

the behavior of the right-wing media ecosystem represents a radicalization of roughly a third of the American media system. We use the term "radicalization" advisedly in two senses. First, to speak of "polarization" is to assume symmetry. No fact emerges more clearly from our analysis of how four million political stories were linked, tweeted, and shared over a three-year period than that there is no symmetry in the architecture and dynamics of communications within the right-wing media ecosystem and outside of it. Second, throughout this period we have observed repeated public humiliation and vicious disinformation campaigns mounted by the leading sites in this sphere against individuals who were the core pillars of Republican identity a mere decade earlier. (Benkler et al., 2018, p. 14).

Benkler et al. believe that the research they performed generally indicated that the left were less susceptible to their biases and that the right sought confirmation bias to their preexisting beliefs. They conclude that "the right-wing media ecosystem differs categorically from the rest of the media environment," and has been much more susceptible to "disinformation, lies and half-truths." As for *Fox News's* role in this, "we found *Fox News* accrediting and amplifying the excesses of the radical sites." (Benkler et al., 2018, p. 14).

The right and the alt-right trade in fake memes, tropes or narratives, especially in an extreme form. This condition of embracing and seeking exaggerated tropes,

tropes, and conspiracy theories and narratives is similar to a distortion of a scenario discussed in Søren Kierkegaard's notion of what faith's demands. In *Sickness unto Death* (1849), God demands that Abraham sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac. Abraham not only sets out to obey but also does not even try to rationalize and explain himself to others, and only God's intermediary, an angel, stops him. For Kierkegaard, the act of faith entails following God's demands, as irrational as they may appear to be. Kierkegaard wonders what faith would be if it demanded only something rational. The more irrational the demand, the greater the demand of faith to follow through. This seems to be true of the addicted Trump supporters—the greater his insane comments and demands, the greater the unflinching allegiance (e.g., science is a cultural war against one's individual rights to refuse to wear a mask, unless your child gets a case of smallpox (anti-vaxxers not withstanding)). Like Abraham's unflinching acceptance of God's demands, consider the unflinching acceptance of conspiracy theories (conspiracy theories seem to thrive on an addiction to apophenia), such as the willing suspension of disbelief that was required to swallow one of the early conspiracy theories called Pizzagate. It was conspiracy theory espoused by the alt-right, particularly through Alex Jones, the host of InfoWars, that Hillary Clinton was sexually abusing children in the basement of a pizza shop, Comet Ping Pong, in Washington, DC. On December 4, 2016, based on his embrace of the Alex Jones' narrative (along with an anti-Democratic bias and other cognitive biases), Edgar Madison Welch, of Salisbury, NC, walked through the front door of the restaurant, pointed an assault rifle in the direction of an employee and fired (Robb, 2020). Fortunately, no one was hurt, but the narrative was so compelling to Welch that checking the facts did not occur to him (e.g., the restaurant had no basement). What is disturbing is his unflinching acceptance of the narrative, his emotional triggers having become supersensitive. Another case was the conspiracy theories about the cause of the horrendous fires in Oregon and California in the summer of 2020. The conspiracy theory was that members of Antifa (Anti-Fascists, started initially been to fight racism but expanded to include other extremists (Antifa, 2020)) set the fires. When homeowners were asked to leave their homes for safety reasons, they refused, arguing that they needed to protect their homes from the roaming gangs of Antifa (Healy & Baker, 2020). It

was a false rumor most likely set by the alt-right trying to help Trump's reelection campaign. Their "faith" in Trump is another form of sickness unto death, sickness built on an ill-conceived, propagandized self-righteousness that supports a faux patriotism and misguided interpretation of the Constitution, the separation of powers, and the nature of American democracy. The difference between Kierkegaard's sickness unto death and theirs was that his goal was redemption, while theirs is willful ignorance that pretends it is not willful, an addiction to some Gnostic gospel that is supposedly the subtext of all political reality.

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 but what grabs our attention, politically, socially, commercially, etc. With that in mind, another way of characterizing the current age is the Age of Surveillance Capitalism.

#### **4. Age of Surveillance Capitalism**

Wonderful insight about this topic is found in Netflix's documentary, *The Social Dilemma* (Orlowski, 2020). The following commentary summarizes some of its themes. It should be no surprise the silicon valley tech companies, primarily Facebook, Apple and Google, can and do keep track of everything that anyone does online – what sites one visits and for how long, what images one looks at and for how long, what things one buys or are interested in, what friends one has, what "likes" (or its variations) one posts, who one phototags or is phototagged by, what engagement one has with what sites (how one navigates through a site, how long one stays on pages or subpages, what interactions one engages in, such as posting a comment, giving one's email address, engaging in a poll, clicking through links, etc. (all known as engagements). These are all fed into a profile that slowly builds over time, never disappears, and is continuously updated and refined. It is like taking every news story and changing it for where and who one is reading it, making the content of a news entry vary for each and every person. This is what is happening on Facebook. One gets a different answers and different advertisements for where and who one is, built on one's profile so that if one asks about climate change, the person next to you in the lab or a Facebook friend will

get a different answer. One might be told that it is a hoax or that it is not man-made, and somebody else will be presented with an opposite view. As one observer said in *The Social Dilemma*, citing a lack of social responsibility of these software developers and companies, a disinformation-for-profit model. It can involve shaming by suggesting that one is not living up to norms (that is, the norms of a typical white male's version of society (i.e., that of the software developer). In an engaging webinar, "Your Online Data & Algorithmic Bias: How it Affects You Every Day - Virtual Roundtable Discussion" (November 12, 2020), (<https://umdischool.activehosted.com/index.php?action=social&chash=bbcbff5c1f1ded46c25d28119a85c6c2.470>) panelist Dr. Jen Golbeck presented a personal story. While she is married, she made a conscious decision not to have children. As she approached 40 years old, her social media feeds were filled with solicitations about freezing her eggs. After all, she was a woman and who would abrogate the norms that the job of a woman, especially a married woman, was to have a baby? Another panelist, Dr. Nicol Turner-Lee, a sociologist researcher, discussed how software algorithms were racist and discriminatory in what opportunities are made to what individuals, based on perceived (or assumed) income level and social background, derived from online profiling.

This infinite, individual profiling is possible because of computers' enormous computational power, cheap and easily available storage, across and through world-wide high-speed networks. It will not only predict one's behavior but also it will slowly begin to control one's behavior through psychological mechanisms. The purpose of attention merchants is not only to engage your attention but also to promote addiction to technologies, sites and apps. For the surveillance capitalists, there are three goals: the engagement goal (keep the person engaged and wanting to return to a site), the growth goal (get the users to get others to join), and the advertising goal (to market and sell products) (Orlowski, 2020). These goals are driven by the desire to make money by attracting one's attention (which makes money from advertisers) or attracting one's consumption of products, goods and services. The problem is that there are no constraints on their money-making, despite its many damaging effects, such as adolescents cutting themselves or



committing suicide for a lack of getting enough "likes" in Facebook and other apps.

*The Social Dilemma* ironically notes that even the people who developed the addicting software fell prey to the software, even knowing what was behind it. To one, the addiction was Twitter, to another email, to another Facebook. The addiction is based on positive intermittent reinforcement (adding a reward, such as financial gain, in order to invoke a response). Like a gambling addict at a slot machine, when the last lever pull of the "one-arm bandit" did not succeed in a winning row, it entices the next lever pull by occasionally offering a win. Human vulnerabilities in psychology are exploited for monetary advantage, without regard to harmful effects. For example, every time you binge-watch a movie on Netflix or Amazon Prime (itself possibly an addiction), you are offered the reward of another movie similar to the one just seen so that one can binge on binge-watching.

Many mostly ex-software developers or marketers for the big three, Apple, Facebook, and Google, have raised alarms about manipulative software. One is Tristan Harris, who began to discuss these problems in a 2016 Atlantic article, "The Binge Breaker" (Bosker, 2016), in which he discusses the process of addiction to smartphones. He has worked on a lot of projects promoting ethical options in software (such as, instead of a sound or vibration to attract attention when one gets an email, to keep the phone silent to prevent constant interruptions so that one can stay focused on the project at hand). One of the stars of *The Social Dilemma*, he currently is the president and co-founder of a Center for Humane Technology. Another voice for an ethical response to software applications is Jaron Lanier. Some of the arguments that Jaron Lanier has posed in *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now* are that it robs one of one's free will, social media is undermining the truth (both by the exploitation of psychological weaknesses), it makes what one says meaningless (by leveling all forms of cognition), it turns one into a jerk (by squandering one's time seeking vapid methods for approval, like "thumbs up" or hearts on social media sites). Anna Lemke claims that social media is a drug (Orlowski, 2020). According to the Newport Academy, a rehabilitation center for adolescents and

their families struggling with mental health issues, eating disorders, and substance abuse, *The Social Dilemma* provides four adverse effects of social media on teenagers: (1) persuasive technology – their generated profiles leads "to persuade them to keep scrolling longer, so they will view more ads, invite more friends, and generate more money for the platforms and their advertisers"; (2) fake popularity – teenagers place great value on such short-term rewards as hearts, likes, "thumbs up," but when they don't get them they feel "even more vacant and empty" than before, citing Chamath Palihapitiya, Facebook's former VP of growth, in the film; (3) snapshot dysmorphia -- teenagers, especially girls, develop poor body images, as a result of the unrealistic standards for beauty depicted in social media, which may lead to cutting themselves or suicide; and (4) digital pacifier – there is growing evidence that teenagers (and adults) "have lost the ability to calm and soothe themselves with real-world reflection, activities, and relationships. Instead, they deal with challenging emotions by turning to social media for distraction and entertainment" (Monroe, 2020). Perhaps more problematic is the use of "digital pacifiers" shoved in front of children to occupy them to prevent them from being bored or crying, so that they learn to avoid developing any interior life, continuously externalizing their needs and wants. One suspects that some crying has moral benefits for children.

The "Age of Surveillance Capitalism" was articulated and developed by Shoshana Zuboff, the Charles Edward Wilson Professor Emerita at Harvard Business School, in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. She defines surveillance capitalism as:

1. A new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales;
2. A parasitic economic logic in which the production of goods and services is subordinated to a new global architecture of behavioral modification;
3. A rogue mutation of capitalism marked by concentrations of wealth, knowledge, and power unprecedented in human history;
4. The foundational framework of a surveillance economy;
5. As significant a threat to human nature in the twenty-first century as industrial capitalism was to the natural world in the nineteenth and twentieth;
6. The origin of a new instrumentarian power that asserts dominance over society and presents startling challenges to market democracy;
7. A movement that aims to impose a new collective order based on total certainty;
8. An expropriation of critical human rights that is best understood as a coup from above: an overthrow of the people's sovereignty. (Zuboff, 2020, preface).

Given the context discussed above, she believes that human beings' experiences are commodities that are and will be manipulated by international tech companies for exploitation and profit, overthrowing democracy. It is a bleak portrait, but given the current trends in psychological manipulation with no impetus to stop it, it does represent a possible and frightening future, where the whole world becomes Plato's Cave.

Many unresearched adverse effects of social media and digital technologies are thrown upon the world because it makes money without concern about the long-range, not to mention the immediate impact, of those technologies. One of the most destructive phenomena is the algorithm that drives YouTube. YouTube engages a rabbit hole phenomenon that increases right-wing radical viewership. When perusing YouTube videos for certain content, such as a specific conspiracy theory, the site's algorithm suggests more provocative videos to view, which in turn offers more provocative videos to view. The impact is to advance Google's profits, with dire political consequences. Sociologist and information and library science professor Zeynep Tufekci declared YouTube to be "one of the most radicalizing instruments of the 21st century" because of these mechanisms (Tufekci, 2018). According to the analysis of New York Times columnists Max Fisher and Amanda Taub, Brazil's ultra-right president Jair Bolsonaro owes his electoral success primarily to YouTube videos (Fisher & Taub, 2019). With such algorithmic features that inflame one's political grievances, it is easy to see another possibility for describing the underbelly of the Age of Information as the Age of Inflamed Grievances.

## **5. The Age of Inflamed Grievances**

In the United States at the moment, there are two areas in which one's grievances are primarily inflamed politically: cable news shows such as Fox News described earlier and in social media. Take *Fox News* as the first example.

*Fox News* starts with or instills a maelstrom of grievances, resentments, a sense of invisibility or a lack of importance of its viewers. The wider culture often challenges many of their core values (e.g., white male dominance). It then tells those viewers what they want to hear, consciously or unconsciously, with claims

supporting and fulfilling their cognitive biases and real, instilled or professed ideology. For example, they may think of themselves as conservatives, without having much depth about its meaning, except maintaining things as they were (e.g., white male dominance in society). *Fox News* (pseudoangelia) will then shape and enlarge that image with anti-liberal, anti-labor, pro-business, pro-average-joe narratives.

These messages are myths, tropes, and narratives (pseudoangelos), often detailed through the shows of their various pundits. They include persistent myths about antifa conspiracies, fast fixes or lies about the coronavirus epidemic or the extraordinary leadership of Trump. They echo the view that God rewards those who work hard and other variations of the Protestant work ethic, implying that those who are poor or disadvantaged have not worked hard enough and deserve their circumstances. It presents white privilege as the natural way of things and racism as a thing of the past. Kneeling during the national anthem is an insult to the flag or to the country. It satirizes the mass media as pushing values that are un-American. It claims that restrictions on gun ownership are an assault on fundamental human rights and the Constitution. It mirrors and accentuates the lies on radical right-wing websites, such as Breitbart (Benkler et al., 2018, p. 14). The emotional triggers that it fosters are legion, not to say they are real, only that they work.

They engage in "motivated reasoning," especially when the topic at hand is something that promotes or inflames their cause. It is the effect of emotions that we associate with a given topic at a primal level. It is not really reasoning but rationalization, making our arguments fit a pre-determined end. Not only does it involve a confirmation bias but also, as noted earlier, a "disconfirmation bias" "in which we expend disproportionate energy trying to debunk or refute views and arguments that we find uncongenial." (Mooney, 2011). When they grab onto what appears to be scientific evidence that supports their bias, they pounce on it. When one "scientist" proclaims that climate change is a hoax, they are featured on *Fox News* and the overwhelming majority of scientists are ignored, if not mocked. These arguments from motivated reasoning or memes, myth, tropes and narratives are reinforced and repeated throughout the disinformation-misinformation

ecosystem to the point of addiction where viewers' self-deception dialectically reinforces and is reinforced by the social and collective self-deception of others and selective events in the disinformation-misinformation ecosystem. This disinformation-misinformation ecosystem is a filter bubble or "propaganda feedback loop." (Benkler et al., 2018, p. 33). Morrison (2018) suggests that right-wing media keep over a quarter of Americans siloed in this "propaganda feedback loop." Because *Fox News* promotes relentless moral outrage, viewers are prone to believe irrational or unfounded claims or assertions and regard all other venues as fake news. This moral outrage is reflected in the actions of the viewers taken into the market place, such as the refusal to wear masks for the coronavirus pandemic or the urgency to call the police when any Black person they imagine is threatening to them. It is not that Fox News alone does this – so do some social media sites – but it is a major factor given its degree of influence that we have outlined earlier. *Fox News* claims to base its stories on evidence and facts. At best, when they actually use facts, their interpretation of these facts is often distorted, manipulated, misleading or missing.

It claims to be trustworthy – it is only trustworthy in that it reinforces and stokes bias. It claims to have journalistic integrity. It is not journalistic integrity when you make the narrative about the facts or the omission of facts fit your political bias or when you originate a narrative based on a conspiracy theory of a radical right-wing social media site. (Benkler et al., 2018, p. 14). It claims to have expertise, but its expertise is sophistry, because they are interested in political power and influence and economic rewards -- as noted earlier, they make nearly 2 billion dollars a year (Stelter, 2020, p. 20), getting partisans addicted to *Fox News*. The repetition of *Fox News*'s messages through social media and other personal and social interactions reinforces and socializes the self-deception. *Fox News* (as a pseudoangelia) exists as a significant component of a disinformation-misinformation ecology composed of like-minded peers, friends, associates, religious leaders, politicians, and pundits which foster, nurture and reinforce one's grievances through memes, narratives, tropes and stories (pseudoangelos). It is a major component of a "propaganda feedback loop," where each part reinforces and inflames the others, through multiple channels (Cable news, social media,

group associations, party rallies, word-of-mouth, etc.), all of them echoing each other. *Fox News* relies for its authority on a self-reinforcing dialectical process where each part reinforces the other and rejects discordant information. Despite all the lies, distortions and misinformation, *Fox News* has a robust approval rating at 43% and a steady 63% among Republicans and Republican leaning independents (Gramlich, 2020). The right-wing mania awash with all sorts of false information is not mirrored in the center or on the right, as noted above by Benkler (Benkler et al, 2018, p. 14).

Regardless of topic, *Fox News* commentators are supposed to stoke rage and push the emotional buttons of their viewers. Tobin Smith, a former *Fox News* commentator, suggests that their programming fosters an addictive and resentment-based process to:

- [1] Understand the elderly white conservative viewer's pre-tribal mindset, which is a compilation of their resentments, indignations, cultural values, religious values, political values, racial perspectives, regional outlooks, and worldviews.
- [2] Scare or outrage the crap out of viewers by boring down on a recently exposed tribal nerve like a psychic dentist with a drill, presenting hearsay or an innately scary image of non-white/non-Christian foreigners, immigrants, or terrorists doing horrible things.
- [3] Produce each seven-minute rigged outcome opinion-debate segment around the carefully selected partisan hearsay such that the "fair and balanced" debate is massively rigged for the conservative pundits on the program to . . .
- [4] Deliver the climactic and righteous rhetorical victory for the partisan right-wing viewer to trigger the jolt of dopamine and serotonin that the addict anticipated and knew was coming. (Smith, 2019, pp. 485–486).

In other words, Smith argues that *Fox News* programming fosters an addictive process, based in addictive fear, anger and/or resentment, that is played and replayed over and over again, and validated by a chosen-in-bad-faith, restrictive environment (i.e., their filter bubble) in which *Fox News* viewers live and dwell (i.e., peers, friends, political associates, religious affiliates, social media sources, etc., that reinforce their confirmation and disconfirmation biases).

According to Eric Wemple, the influence of *Fox News* cannot be underestimated.

There's simply no outlet that dominates any other part of the political spectrum in the way *Fox News* dominates the right. With that dominance, *Fox News* has done great damage. It's not as if *Fox News*'s influence extends to only however many millions may be viewing in prime time. There's what

experts call a "media ecosystem" out there, where people take nonsense uttered on *Fox News*, then share it on Twitter, on Facebook, with their neighbor. Nonsense has a high pass around rate. (Wemple, 2019)

The dominance of *Fox News* recalls the dominance of government-controlled news in authoritarian countries, from the Third Reich to modern-day Russia and China. In other countries control is through some government-run propaganda agency, but in Trump's world, the enslavement to one's biases is self-imposed by fostering addiction and inflating biases or resentments. *Fox News* viewers have no desire to escape it (nor right-wing social media sites), as its system of self-reinforcing self-deception—individual, social, and collective—is more robust than past generators of propaganda could ever conceive. Tobin Smith, refers to the consumption of Fox News as addiction to "tribal partisan identity porn," based on cultural and political resentments that "trigger feelings of hate, anger and outrage—the addictive trifecta of tribal partisan pornography" (Smith, 2019, p. 459).

Social media sites can also act as cognitive authorities or pseudo-cognitive authorities (pseudoangelia). The problem with the internet is that is a self-serve "information" bank. Using Google or some social media sites like mediabiasfactcheck.com, one can often find legitimate information. For many on the right, right-wing social media (e.g., Breitbart, Truthfeed, Infowars, Gateway Pundit, Zero Hedge, QAnon) is a self-serve disinformation or misinformation bank. It is not quite self-serve because the self that is served is one that enprisons one's biases. Right-wing ideologues, foreign agents and click-bait entrepreneurs (all pseudoangelia) produce a deluge of disinformation of memes and narratives (pseudoangelos) to solicit (at a minimum) and inflame (at a maximum) the disinformation seeker at these sites. Self-serve engagement is mediated by cognitive bias, confirmation bias, and steorage to selective sources. Generally, there are little restrictions on the kind of content that is made available. Conservatives are more susceptible to clickbait than liberals, more likely to fall for fake news. (Ingraham, 2019). Beyond specific right-wing media sources, as political commentator and professor Robert Reich argued in the *Guardian*, Facebook and Twitter are alarmingly influential. As he wrote:

The reason 45% of Americans rely on Facebook for news and Trump's tweets reach 66 million is because these platforms are near monopolies, dominating the information marketplace. No TV network, cable giant or newspaper even comes close. *Fox News'* viewership rarely exceeds 3 million. *The New York Times* has 4.7 million subscribers.

Facebook and Twitter aren't just participants in the information marketplace. They're quickly becoming the information marketplace. (Reich, 2019).

One of the most problematic aspects of social media are the number of hate groups and the far-right partisans that use it to attract followers and disseminate their propaganda. A report of "Hate in America," a project produced by the Carnegie-Knight News21 initiative, did a study of far-right users of Facebook, Twitter, Gab, VK, and others during a two-week period in June 2018. They tracked more than 3 million followers and compiled more than 2,500 posts from these platforms that threatened harm against Black Americans, Latinos, Jews, and LGBTQ+ people. These posts got over a half-million likes and were shared 200,000 times. This evidence shows the strength and breadth of these groups, who gain power by assembling a collective voice, despite some platforms' restrictions (Gardner, 2018). What poses an additional threat is the spread and speed of disinformation and the inflammation of emotional triggers (memes, tropes). MIT researchers Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral (2018) found in a study of rumor cascades from 2006 to 2017 that false information spreads more quickly and broadly than truthful information and that those on the right are more susceptible and more prone to disseminate false information than those on the left.

It is simply wrong to believe that Facebook as a whole is balanced or neutral and has no particular bias. The *Economist* did a study on Facebook using CrowdTangle, a Facebook tool that tracks how web material is shared across social media. They discovered that in August, 2020, the two most popular sites were *Fox News* and Breitbart measured by user engagements – shares, views, comments and other activities. They concluded that

whatever Facebook's intentions, the social-networking site has more of a political slant than Mr. Zuckerberg lets on. Using CrowdTangle, we compiled a list of the media outlets that received the most Facebook engagement in August. We then examined the top 35 for which data on their political biases were available from Ad Fontes Media, a media-watchdog organisation. All told, these sites received an average of 8.7m engagements in August. Fox News topped the list with 56.4m interactions in the month;



MSNBC, a rival cable-news network, received just 9.7m (Facebook. . . , 2020).

Obviously, it is nice to think that the truth will always win out. But in the Age of Disinformation, this approach seems too simplistic. Thus, we must ask, is there a limit to free expression when that expression leads to harmful acts to demonized populations, the destruction of trust in political, governmental and media institutions, the loss of expertise, and the denigration of science and evidence?

Robert Reich (Reich, 2019) argues that two actions need to occur to bring rational control back to the internet. First, there should be some anti-trust action that would break up the large providers, such as Facebook and Twitter. He argues that they have a too broad and monolithic influence. Second, we must prevent such providers from pretending to be neutral providers of information for which they have no responsibility. They must develop policies to constrain lies and disinformation at a minimum.

In sum, we have a diversity of sites on the internet and there are places where one can obtain reliable information. There are many sites where the opposite is true. Fox News and alt-right social media sites are two of the major factors that have contributed to the uncivil discourse in American society, the undermining of American democracy and democratic institutions, the decline in law and order, an anti-science, anti-humanistic agenda, and the hypersensitivity to presumed threats to one's rights and ideology. These are sites that can serve to inflame one's biases, which one's proclivities and social media can solicit and inflame one's fear, anger and self-righteousness, particularly on the right. It is naive to think that users can sort out misinformation or disinformation by themselves: many lack the skills to evaluate information critically or to assess who are proper cognitive authorities, or they fall prey to the Dunning Kruger effect by being unable to recognize the limits of their perceptions, much like Plato's Cave dwellers. The problem is that they are enslaved in their biases and so heavy doses of information, media and digital literacies are not likely to reach into their filter bubble or closed propaganda loop.

If we had a choice to describe which Age was the best to describe the underbelly of the Age of Information, the last two, the Age of Surveillance Capitalism and the Age of Inflamed Grievances are the most potent, for until their issues are

addressed we are surely destined to self-destruct, as a democracy, as a country, as a world and as a planet.

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### Author contribution

The entirety of this manuscript was prepared by Thomas J. Froehlich.

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