

The (Dis)Information Age

From Post-Truth to Post-Postmodernism

by

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Series in Sociology



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To those whose lives were forever altered by the events of September 11, 2001, and all who seek healing in the face of trauma.

A special thanks to my amazing family. You are my whole world. I love you forever. And I would be remiss if I did not express much gratitude to all my students over the years. Thank you for sharing your educational journeys with me. I am forever changed by you.

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Prologue

The concept of when and if postmodernism ended is still debated; if it did end, there has yet to be a consensus about what comes after it. This book undertakes these complexities and defines this new era as the (Dis)Information Age, which began with the September 11, 2001, terror attacks. 9/11 dramatically changed political, social, and cultural manifestations. Few events have such a tremendous impact on the collective consciousness that they cause immense cultural changes, but September 11 marked the beginning of a new era filled with more significant anxiety and uncertainty. The Bush Administration's response by launching a military campaign against Iraq set the stage for those in power to manipulate intelligence and data to further their objectives. The (Dis)Information Age comprises two cultural phenomena: post-truth and post-postmodernism. Post-truth consists of government officials and media outlets promoting false information to mislead the public. This lack of clarity has created increased skepticism towards those in authority and distrust towards facts and data. The rise of the internet and social media have further individualized information, where even current and historical events have politicized and fragmented society along ideological lines. The result is that people share fewer common facts than in previous eras. Post-postmodernism is a cultural movement that has responded to post-truth's weaponization, misuse, and individualization of information. Where truth and reality have become increasingly difficult to ascertain in the (Dis)Information Age, post-postmodern artists have combated this trend with increased connectivity and certainty through art. To them, truth does not reside in the individual interpretation, which can be manipulated, but in collective understanding.

Introduction

In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates warns that tyranny can overturn democracy because humanity tends to be driven toward extremism. A passion for bondage counters the passion for liberty: "[T]yranny naturally arises out of democracy, and the most aggravated form of tyranny and slavery out of the most extreme form of liberty" (Plato 283). Socrates believes comfort and excess lead to compliancy, where people become so drunk in their own ideals that they lose the sense of what is most important to the republic (or community). Such concerns are timely in a world where democracy appears more tenuous than ever due to extreme ideological divides. According to a Gallup poll, only 28% of people feel confident about democracy in the U.S. in 2024 (Jones), and a Monmouth poll shows 30% of the U.S. still believe Biden stole the 2020 election. 2024 presents a crossroads in modern democracies with aid to Ukraine in question and Israel becoming increasingly isolated from its Western allies. If Ukraine is unable to halt Russia's aggression, it would underscore the fragility that democracies face today and a despotic expansionism that has not been seen since World War II. Israel's aggressive counterattack against Hamas has further ignited the Middle East against them and made it more challenging for Western politicians to support them, marking a sea-change in foreign policy. Far-right political groups in France, Germany, and Belgium are making headway that would further demonstrate a new era in global politics. With waning trust in the election process, tyrannical governments, once marked with turmoil and instability, now seem more resolute and stable than their democratic counterparts. This is not to say that tyranny is the solution to the instability of democracies, but it should be concerning that such sentiments are gaining popularity. Extremism has guided social angst that, as Socrates suggests, moves towards authoritarianism.

This book seeks to understand where these divisions originate and demonstrates how artists have provided solutions to these societal divides. Differences of opinion are a natural part of the human condition; however, the addition of the internet and social media have exacerbated these factions far beyond evolutionary adaptation. The Information Age, coined by Richard Longhorn in 1960, signaled a dramatic shift toward technology and the dissemination of information. Not since Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in 1440 has there been such a radical change in humanity's access to

information. Daniel Bell's *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* defined the Information Age as a shift from an industrial to a technological economy. Technology has democratized information, making it more accessible; however, the over-abundance of information has had negative impacts as people find it challenging, if not impossible, to navigate. Search engines help with this by sifting through millions of data points to calculate what information the user wants to access based on previous searches and algorithms to provide only the most relevant information. However, this creates information gaps that are tailored to a person's age, race, ethnicity, sexuality, political ideals, etc. Thus, the Information Age has shifted to an age of misinformation as people have a false sense of being informed when the opposite is often more correct (Liu, Xia, Yu, Guo, & Sun). People access information that conforms to their worldview, and this has created greater ideological divisions. The result is that people are no longer living in the same reality. The Dunning-Kruger Effect finds people with greater incompetencies overestimate their performance and abilities, suggesting a more favorable cognitive bias due to a lack of self-awareness. In a like manner, the internet feeds people information that aligns with their biases, and this creates a false sense of competency and knowledge. Perspective and intellectual humility have become all but lost. Slavoj Žižek, a Slovenian philosopher and cultural critic, examines ideological divides in *The Parallax View*. He argues that a parallax gap is the confrontation of two linked perspectives in which no neutral ground is possible. This, in part, summarizes the (Dis)Information Age, where there is a strain or impediment (whether knowingly or unknowingly self-imposed or restricted by external entities) to access reliable and balanced information and a battle over the interpretation of facts that groups have become so divided by ideological ideals that the gulf between them seems insurmountable.

Modernism has always grappled with a gap in social consciousness, which Žižek traces to dialectical materialism. Marx's ideas regarding materialism changed the way people perceived reality and created a consciousness based on socio-economic class (Žižek 6). This changed the view of morality, seeing it as a social construct instead of an innate characteristic. Kierkegaard adds that this consciousness separates thought from being: we exist apart from ourselves, creating a reality that is different from who we are (e.g., bourgeoisie vs. proletariat, colonizer vs. colonized) (7). Social class determines identity, where people tend to perceive the world through their economic status and access to power. Žižek asserts Einstein's theory of relativity further advanced the subjectivity of reality based on personal experience. Truth to modernists

like Marx, Kierkegaard, and Einstein exists in the interplay between personal encounters, social influences, and cultural contexts. Postmodernists try to bridge the distance modernism finds in individual consciousness by asserting truth exists in the intersection of multiple narratives and can even exist in diverse and contradictory viewpoints. However, this book finds that a new age began with the attacks on September 11, 2001, and humanity now contends with a very different view of consciousness and truth. The (Dis)Information Age confronts the inability to find common ground, and this creates a parallax gap with opposing ideas perceived as existential threats. This phenomenon makes recent elections more heated and the outcomes more contentious. The U.S. Presidential election in 2016 and the aftermath of the 2020 U.S. Presidential election are prominent examples, but disinformation has also influenced major elections in Sri Lanka, Mexico, Brazil, West Africa, and Europe. Social media, deep fake, and AI pose new and increased threats to the integrity of elections and faith in their outcomes.

There has yet to be a strong consensus regarding when and if postmodernism ended. As such, there is no agreement about the new age's name, origins, or tenets. This book undertakes these complexities, naming this new age, tracing its origins and tenants, and presenting solutions to the problems it faces. The 2001 terror attacks launched humanity into a new era: The (Dis)Information Age. Two contending conceptual frameworks fracture this new age. The first is dogmatism, where one's beliefs are viewed as absolute and superior. The second is political entities using misinformation and disinformation to promote their narrative. The (Dis)Information Age takes the relativity of modernism's philosophical inquiry and applies it to facts and data by advancing all ideas, even objective ones, are subjective and open for interpretation. It seems the subjectivity of information would lead to greater critical analysis; however, fascinatingly, the (Dis)Information Age has seen the opposite effect. Running parallel with individualized reality, the instability of information has led to greater anxiety, and to counter the uncertainty, people have gravitated toward closed-minded zealotry and opted for overly simplistic black-and-white binaries rather than a more complex and complete view of the world. Extremism and conspiracy theories have become more prevalent in the search for assurance over well-reasoned and evidence-based understanding.

The (Dis)Information Age has taken a step back from the rationalism that has pervaded modern thought since the Baroque Age. Erik Roraback's *Philosophical Baroque* examines the intellectual underpinnings of modernism that trace back to the seventeenth century, when there was a movement away from mysticism.

Baroque endeavored to scientifically solve the challenges of social and economic injustice. He asserts:

[T]he notion of a relational baroque system (that is, 1590-present) of differences of capitalist modernity outfitted by structure, risk, and contingency accordingly. This constitutes an apposite and dialectical way of laying the foundational paving stones of our modern baroque-era and erects an analytical framework through which we can understand the nature of culture and practical reality in the early twenty-first century" (52).

The Baroque era provided a framework for rationally perceiving the world away from religious doctrine. Scientific truth became more important than religious truth. The (Dis)Information Age, however, is the first modern era that places more gravitas on ideology over veracity and belief systems have superseded empirical evidence. Truth and reality have become increasingly difficult to ascertain in this post-truth world and have created increased skepticism towards those in the government and media. The rise of the internet and social media has compounded this with information silos. The result is that people share fewer common ideas than in previous eras and are no longer living in a shared reality. Post-truth emphasizes simplicity and reductionism, and, with the inability to perceive the world as complex and nuanced, critical thinking and reasoned debate have been cast aside for dogmatism.

Post-postmodernism presents potential antidotes to post-truth's weaponization, misuse, and individualization of information. These artists seek connectivity and common ground to combat increased ideological warfare. This study examines the intricate relationship between recent socio-historic events and cultural manifestations that respond to them to understand better the world in which we live, and its interdisciplinary approach charts the cultural changes from postmodernism to post-postmodernism. Post-truth distorts postmodernism's value in the plurality of meaning and applies this ambiguity to data and facts. Post-postmodernists react to this trend. Artists like Marina Abramovic, Tamy Ben-Tor, and Julian Rosefeldt seek a new language and caution against obscuring or individualizing facts and truth. Post-postmodernism is a more severe age of anxiety and distress due to the vulnerabilities exposed on 9/11, and a more self-referential severe tone has replaced postmodernism's playful self-reflexivity. Post-postmodernists seek ways to cope with collective trauma. Douglas Gordon and Ulla Von Brandenburg express the horrors of uncertainty in an increasingly ambiguous world and caution against inventing our realities

as a means of coping. Richard Serra, Christo and Jean Claude, Sushana Rucker, and Elmgreen and Draget exhibit the emptiness and fragmentation of post-industrialism and question a world that focuses so heavily on corporate capitalism.

This book further explores how films have responded to these trends. The works of Lilly and Lana Wachowski, David Fincher, Woody Allen, David Lynch, Christopher Nolan, Wes Anderson, Josh and Benny Safdie, Quentin Tarantino, Taika Waititi, and Spike Jones examine how contemporary culture continually obscures truth and fiction, reality and illusion, and fact and fable. Films reflect recent trends to escape the problems and complexities of modern life to find solace amid the protagonists' mental constructs. Such filmmakers assert that intellectual independence is necessary to remove exterior influences that impose hegemonic ideas but caution against becoming so immersed in individual truth and self-reality that one disconnects from humanity. While recent socio-political events may have signaled another era in human civilization, the War on Terror has changed how we have come to understand what is real. This book examines the socio-political changes that have occurred since 2001, ending postmodernism and launching humanity into a new age of disinformation, and it studies how these trends influenced visual art and film. Historically, avant-garde artists analyze social problems and use their medium to redirect society. Contemporary artists likewise use their craft to expose the problems of a world where community has deteriorated to a point where we have fewer shared beliefs and realities.

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