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# **DEMOCRATIC KNOWLEDGE AND THE PROBLEM OF FACTION**

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# IS INTERNET MISINFORMATION RUINING AMERICAN DEMOCRACY?

Since the late 2000s, writers have blamed the Internet for abetting a “post-fact society,” where people, congregating in one-sided “filter bubbles,” have come to see themselves as entitled to “their own facts.”<sup>1</sup> The 2016 populist resurgence in Western democracies and Donald Trump’s norm-shattering rise to the presidency have given these anxieties new life on and offline.<sup>2</sup> Just days after the 2016 presidential election, President Barack Obama claimed that “If we are not serious about facts and what’s true and what’s not,” then Americans risked losing “so much of what we’ve gained in terms of the kind of democratic freedoms and market-based economies and prosperity that we’ve come to take for granted.” Has new technology raised the problems of propaganda and misinformation to new heights? Are they jeopardizing the health of democracy? How should we respond to the dynamics of what often feels like a fact-free political discourse?

Ours is not the first age to have struggled with the problems of propaganda and misinformation. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, worries about the manipulation of public opinion were perhaps as common as in our own. A close look at those earlier moments can help us clarify the nature of the problem that confronts us today and to identify solutions. The challenge that faces us is not metaphysical; it is not, contra some, the question of what, within the swirl of information that surrounds us, is true and what is false. The challenge, instead, is ethical. It is a question, as Obama said, of whether we’re “serious” about truth.

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1 Manjoo, Farhad. 2008. *True Enough: Learning to Live in a Post-Fact Society*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons. Pariser, Eli. 2011. *The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web Is Changing What We Read and How We Think*. New York: Penguin. Sunstein, Cass R. 2009. *Republic.com 2.0*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Lessig, Lawrence. 2006. *Code: And Other Laws of Cyberspace*. New York: Basic Books.

2 Digital technology is certainly not exclusively to blame for ongoing political and epistemic polarization. Recently, Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro find that the greatest growth in polarization has occurred within the age groups least likely to use the Internet or social media. See Boxell, Levi, Gentzkow, Matthew and Shapiro, Jesse M. 2017. “Greater Internet use is not associated with faster growth in political polarization among US demographic groups.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Published online before print. However, we might follow Langdon Winner (and Wittgenstein) in recognizing that the Internet represents a “form of life,” which shapes the cognitive and material conditions of social reality independent of individuals’ actual use. Just as we live in a world crisscrossed with roads, regardless of whether we drive or not, the Internet precipitates a culture and epistemic ecosystem in which the overwhelming speed, volume, and skepticism of information are the norm online and off. See Winner, Langdon. 2014. “Technologies as Forms of Life.” In *Ethics and Emerging Technologies*, ed. Ronald L. Sandler. London: Palgrave Macmillan.



The pressing issue is whether we are individually committed to norms of honesty and collectively committed to processes of social learning that rest on them.

By social learning, we mean a circular process of aggregating relevant information, making indeterminate decisions, and updating civic knowledge. Civic knowledge, in turn, refers to broadly shared understandings about how to interpret collectively curated evidence concerning our circumstances. In a democracy, processes of social learning, anchored by norms for honest inquiry and argument, should knit citizens together, more or less, even as disagreements and contestation endure.

In the contemporary United States, that knitting process of shared social learning has ceased to operate. Our problem is not, fundamentally, one of misinformation, but of what we often call in our contemporary vocabulary polarization, and what the founding generation called faction.

In what follows, we consider the problem faction poses for social learning in America and what we can do to fix it. First, we examine the limits of responses to misinformation that adopt a metaphysical strategy and are characterized by attempts to draw a bright line between what is true and what is false, or to strip political language of rhetoric and self-interest.<sup>3</sup> Uncertainty plagues political judgments and attempts to ground decision-making with only stable metaphysical truths are doomed to fail. Precisely because of that uncertainty, democracies must work instead to achieve the most valid forms of democratic knowledge that they can. Valid democratic knowledge consists of broadly shared diagnoses of circumstances and shared prescriptions in response to them, developed through adherence to norms of inquiry, including the commitment to honesty, and institutions that bring many people together in processes of conversation and deliberation. Sound democratic knowledge is, in short, simply what results from healthy processes of social learning.

The problem confronting journalism and politics in the contemporary United States is not at its core the intermingling of fact and fiction, not a confusion of propaganda with hard-bitten, fact-based policy but rather the breakdown of institutions that facilitate valid social learning across diverse, disagreeing groups. Historically, the institutions that facilitate social learning, for example newspapers, schools, colleges and universities, have served also as anchors for shared norms of inquiry, including for the aforementioned commitment

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3 We owe the focus on this distinction to Luke Menand. "There are two meanings of "truth." One meaning is metaphysical. There are various ways to define that meaning: we say that truth refers to a mind-independent reality, or to the way things really are, or to an objective account of the case, or use other representationalist formulas. Even if we say that there is no truth, there are only truths, we are still usually invoking a metaphysical conception of a thing out there or up there or in here that we are getting closer to or farther from. The other meaning of truth is ethical. Truth means honesty. I think we can waste a lot of time interpreting the attitude of the present administration toward truth as a metaphysical problem. It is not. It is an ethical problem. Does that mean that it does not bear on the mission of universities? On the contrary. It bears directly on our mission, and insofar as academics, whatever their views, can assert themselves as critics of the present political discourse, they should do so on ethical grounds, not epistemological ones.



to honesty, for ideologically diverse populations. Transformations in our media ecosystem (for instance, the disappearance of local and regional newspapers), changes in our residential patterns (by which we are more densely concentrated in ideological groupings), and the disintegration of the credibility of many colleges and universities from the perspective of conservatives have undermined the institutions whose job it is to broker the debate within the citizenry about what different people see as credible or incredible. Under these new conditions, they no longer play an effective mediating role. Moreover, without institutions and practices that broker debate—and as ideologically opposed conversational streams flow separately from one another—citizens themselves fall into habits that keep them from learning from each other. The current discussion of misinformation reflects not only the absence of institutional contexts of mediation but also an ethos in which we are intellectually less able to bridge the divide between what different people see as credible or incredible in order to learn from one another. The bright lines we draw prevent us from taking seriously the disagreements of others and from seeing why what looks so evident to us often looks like propaganda or ignorance to others, and vice versa. This, in turn, only polarizes us further.

In order to see that the problem we face is faction, not misinformation itself, we have to come to grips with the slippery question of how democracies secure the knowledge resources they need for good functioning. In the first two sections of the paper, we explore this question. In section one, we offer a case study of a 20th century effort to fight back against propaganda and draw from its failure some lessons about the knowledge needs and practices of democracies. In section two, we build on those lessons to limn the contours of democratic knowledge. We will come to see that the most basic task of social learning in a democracy is to help dissolve the force of faction. Recognizing this will take us into the terrain of being able to identify potential solutions to the situation in which we currently find ourselves.

The ethical and political, not metaphysical, problem of faction sends us back to one of the architects of our contemporary representative democracy and a powerful analyst of faction's threat to democratic health, James Madison. The third section of the paper reviews the Madisonian approach to resolving the problem of faction. Although Madison saw the geographic diversity of the young country as a major potential source of faction, he also saw geography itself, working in tandem with our representative institutions, as part of the solution. Madison expected that the demographic dispersal of the diverse American public would have salutary effects on niche or extreme viewpoints, requiring their mediation and correction as they passed through a process of multi-stage transmission, from one layer of representation in the federal system to another. A premise of Madison's constitutional architecture for the new republic was that geography itself would provide a solution to faction and facilitate the emergence of moderated and moderating national understandings by requiring citizens and representatives appeal to a wide



range of people unlike themselves.<sup>4</sup>

Yet thanks to 20<sup>th</sup> century technologies of mass communication and 21<sup>st</sup> century social media, geography no longer fulfills the function Madison anticipated. While Madison's solution was elegant, it no longer holds. The dangerous emergence of explicitly partisan mistruths, and the increasing distance of the two political parties' viewpoints from one another, points toward the unravelling of Madisonian wisdom. Faction chokes and blocks the functioning of a democracy by undermining our ability to learn from one another, by hindering the proper development of democratic knowledge.

Consequently, in the fourth and final section, we explore alternatives to the Madisonian solution for the problem of faction, proposing new strategies for building an architecture to support social learning in the United States. We lay out potential solutions to the problems of the present moment. These proposals go beyond a current favorite, namely that we need to embed the basic tools of media literacy in education. Importantly, media literacy can't in itself deliver the patterns of conversation that dissolve the forces of polarization. Instead we look to a set of institutional innovations that might provide an architecture for a reconstruction of practices and structures of social learning. As it happens, such an architecture will also deliver media literacy in that, to function effectively, this architecture must anchor the norms that make processes of social learning healthy: a commitment to honesty, an understanding of how to curate high quality evidence, and skill at logical argumentation. These norms are the foundation for media literacy.

For this essay, our inspiration is James Madison and his analysis of how to thwart the problem of faction. This is the most important task in front of us in our new age of disinformation.

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4 In practice, however, this diversity was deeply constrained. Madison's republican framework was prefaced on the exclusion of all but propertied, white men. The system defended in the *Federalist Papers* incorporated a wide number of concessions to slaveholding interests – or actively supported an economic system based on human ownership – and was prefaced on an ascriptive racial and gender hierarchy. This is not to say the democratic promise of the Madisonian model is irreparably tainted, but to acknowledge the circumscribed pluralism Madison imagined it would face, and did face, in practice during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. See Waldstreicher, David. 2010. *Slavery's Constitution: From Revolution to Ratification*. New York: Hill and Wang.



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# THE TRUE, THE FALSE, AND THE POLITICAL: A CASE STUDY

Ours is not the first era to face an epistemic crisis, a collapse of confidence in our procedures for coming to know things, in the wake of an upheaval in information consumption. Writing in 1927, political scientist Harold Lasswell saw advanced industrial democracies nearing a precipice. Systematic manipulation of mass opinion, he argued, would supplant violence as the dominant means of state control, “a concession to the rationality of the modern world... If the mass will be free of chains of iron, it must accept its chains of silver.”<sup>5</sup>

The systematic deployment of domestic propaganda and wide proliferation of British and German propaganda within the United States during World War I prompted a moral crisis about how easily the public had been manipulated into nationalist fervor.<sup>6</sup> After the war, concerns about subversive campaigns by totalitarian governments in the Soviet Union and Germany kept these anxieties alive, while the rise of the advertising and public relations industries integrated systematic opinion manipulation further into American life.<sup>7</sup> The growth of radio provided both the conditions for nationwide mass culture and a platform for divisive, populist figures like Father Charles Coughlin, Francis Townsend, Huey Long, and Charles Lindbergh to develop national followings.<sup>8</sup>

In the late 1930s, department store magnate Edward Filene and a small circle of educational reformers responded to the collapse in confidence in the epistemic practices of American democracy by founding the Institute for Propaganda Analysis in hopes of teaching young people to identify and

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5 Lasswell, Harold D. 1927. *Propaganda Technique in the World War*. New York: A.A. Knopf, pp. 221-222.

6 See Gary, Brett. 1999. *The Nervous Liberals: Propaganda Anxieties from World War I to the Cold War*. New York: Columbia University Press. Messinger, Gary S. 1992. *British Propaganda and the State in the First World War*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. Sproule, J. Michael. 1997. *Propaganda and Democracy: The American Experience of Media and Mass Persuasion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

7 Ewen, Stuart. 1996. *PR!: A Social History of Spin*. New York: Basic Books.

8 See Brinkley, Alan. 1983. *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression*. New York: Vintage Books. Amenta, Edwin. 2006. *When Movements Matter: The Townsend Plan and the Rise of Social Security*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Olson, Lynne. 2013. *Those Angry Days: Roosevelt, Lindbergh and America's Fight Over World War II*. New York: Random House.



resist information manipulation. A close look at the origins, trajectory, and failure of this effort will help us see the limits of trying to counter the rise of misinformation primarily by seeking to disseminate bright-line accounts of the difference between what is metaphysically true or false.

Over the course of the 1930s, Filene had become increasingly worried that American educational system had left young people poorly equipped to face the challenge posed by totalitarian ideology in an increasingly complex world. The solution, he believed, could not be found “merely in more education of the traditional and customary kind”; instead, education needed now to be in part unlearning “confident knowledge of things that have ceased to be true.”<sup>9</sup> To this end, on March 29, 1937, Filene met with adult education pioneer Kirtley Mather and an eclectic collection of business leaders and educators to discuss the topic of “education for democracy.” The meeting was by most accounts a bust: One attendee, public relations innovator Edward Bernays, described the room as “smoke laden and heavy,” leading Filene “to nod off in little snatches of sleep.”<sup>10</sup> But another guest, Columbia Teacher’s College professor Clyde Miller, left energized.

Miller, an early proponent of media literacy education and propaganda education,<sup>11</sup> believed that the “conflicting opinions, conflicting propaganda” of democratic life required cultivating an ethos of “public enlightenment” around the potentially manipulative character of information.<sup>12</sup> Immediately following the meeting with Filene, he began drafting an outline for an “institute for the study of education, public opinion, and propaganda” to achieve just that.<sup>13</sup> When the group met again in New York, Filene, frustrated with the slow pace of progress and impressed by Miller’s blueprint, offered Miller a \$10,000 grant on the spot. By the fall, Filene and Miller agreed on a name – the Institute for Propaganda Analysis – and funding for three years.<sup>14</sup> Leaving Miller and Mather to lay the Institute’s groundwork and assemble a board of prominent social scientists and educators,<sup>15</sup> Filene

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9 Filene, Edward A. 2008. *Speaking of Change: A Selection of Speeches and Articles*. Madison, WI: The Filene Research Institute, p. 160.

10 Bernays, Edward L. 1965. *Biography of an Idea: Memoirs of Public Relations Counsel Edward L. Bernays*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

11 Miller’s awareness in the dangers of propaganda stemmed from personal experience. As a cub reporter during the war, Miller became famous for reporting socialist leader Eugene Debs to U.S. Attorney for violation of the Espionage Act and sitting as a central witness for his 1918 prosecution. Miller later recanted his rose-tinted view of the war after seeing it for himself as a member of the Army’s Education Corps. Upon his return, Miller sought a pardon for Debs from Ohio Senator Warren G. Harding, who commuted the elderly socialist’s sentence upon becoming president in 1921. Sproule, *Propaganda*, pp. 3-6.

12 Miller, Clyde R. 1936. “The Intelligent Teacher’s Guide to Understanding of Current Issues.” *Junior-Senior High School Clearing House* 10 (9): 521-525. 521. See also Miller, Clyde R. 1933. “The Cure-All for Everything?” *Junior-Senior High School Clearing House* 7 (5): 310-313, p. 313.

13 Sproule, *Propaganda*, p. 134.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 130.

15 Among them were two of the most influential historians of the time, James T. Shotwell and Charles Beard, both out of Columbia. Other board members included sociologist Robert S. Lynd (who has recently published his second Middletown study with wife Helen Lynd), social psychologist Hadley Cantril, Georgist economist and future Senator from Illinois Paul Douglas, and Deweyite education theorist E.C. Lindeman.



traveled to France, where he contracted pneumonia and died suddenly on September 26. The Institute launched nonetheless in October, backed by Filene's philanthropic Good Will Fund and the deceased businessman's word.

In the Institute's preliminary announcements to the press, it laid out its thesis: America "is beset by a confusion of conflicting propaganda, a Babel of voices, warnings, charges, counter-charges, assertions and contradictions, assailing us continuously through press, radio, and newsreel."<sup>16</sup> Thus, "there is today especial need for propaganda analysis... if American citizens are to have a clear understanding of conditions and what to do about them, they must be able to recognize propaganda, to analyze, and to appraise it."<sup>17</sup> Miller envisioned a two-prong approach. First, the Institute would publish a monthly educational newsletter detailing "methods whereby [readers] may become proficient" in scrutinizing the diversity of information they encountered in their own lives.<sup>18</sup> Second, it would provide materials and support for study units in public and private high schools around the country. The board leveraged their personal and professional connections to secure a number of pilot programs in schools in four states.<sup>19</sup> Initial publicity kicked off a flurry of interest and favorable coverage. The San Francisco News editorialized that the Institute's teachings were "one more weapon for democracy in the ceaseless battle against obfuscation and special interest."<sup>20</sup>

While there was great enthusiasm for the IPA's goals, Miller's thinking around propaganda was fuzzy at best. Most of his published work and teaching focused on practical propaganda analysis tactics for young people and relied on unsystematic heuristics and anecdotes rather than a coherent theoretical or methodological foundation. His operating concept of propaganda was broad and unsubtle: any "opinion or action intended to influence the thoughts and actions of others."<sup>21</sup> Writing the first issues of the Propaganda Analysis newsletter singlehandedly while still holding down his Columbia job, Miller lightly adapted a framework of "seven common propaganda devices" from a paper he had written the year before for their second newsletter. American citizens were to be taught to recognize: "name-calling," "glittering generalities," "transfer," "testimony," "plain folks," "card

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16 *New York Herald Tribune*. Oct. 4, 1937. "New Columbia Institute to Analyze Propaganda: Agency Will Help Public Sort Out 'Babel of Voices.'" *New York Herald Tribune*.

17 *New York Times*. Oct. 10, 1937. "PROPAGANDA STUDY IS AIM OF INSTITUTE." *New York Times*.

18 *New York Herald Tribune*. *New York Herald Tribune*, "New Columbia Institute."

19 New York, Illinois, Massachusetts, and Wisconsin.

20 Quoted in Lee, Elizabeth Briant and Alfred McClung Lee. 1979. "The Fine Art of Propaganda Analysis – Then and Now." *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 36 (2): 117-127, p. 120.

21 Miller, Clyde R. and Violet Edwards. 1936. "The Intelligent Teacher's Guide through Campaign Propaganda." *The Clearing House* 11 (2): 69-77, p. 70.



stacking,” and “bandwagon.”<sup>22</sup> Pithy and memorable, the “seven neat, easily understood principles”<sup>23</sup> quickly became the IPA’s calling card and remain the IPA’s most famous contribution to the study of communication. Educator Edgar Dale, a later IPA affiliate, lauded Miller for taking “a number of very complicated fallacies in logic and reduc[ing] them to terms that a fourteen year old child can understand.”<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, the IPA’s work in classrooms was met with almost universal enthusiasm. By August 1940, the number of schools participating in Institute programs had swelled to 650 high schools, 350 adult groups, and 30 elementary schools, and the Institute was distributing material to 3,000 high schools and elementary schools around the country.<sup>25</sup> By 1941, the Institute boasted more than 1 million students taught using their materials, and more than 50 textbooks published in 1939 referenced Institute-backed research. Nearly 2,500 teachers were sending the institute monthly reports about student progress. Most reported positive results: “pupils are able to think more critically in such daily practices as reading newspapers or magazines, appraising radio news comment and listening to classroom or out-of-school discussions... They are less likely to disregard sources and pass on hearsay and gossip.” States and local educational authorities began mandating statewide use of Institute documents.<sup>26</sup> These numbers belied considerable diversity in teaching methods, including open discussions of current events, close readings of news and speeches, or efforts at self-reflection, alongside straightforward lessons about propaganda and stereotypes.<sup>27</sup> According to one estimate, there had been only two articles about propaganda literacy in national education journals in 1935. By 1938 there were 17 and in 1939, 35.<sup>28</sup>

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22 The seven devices were characterized as a set of rhetorical strategies deployed by propagandists to short-circuit critical thinking. Miller described them in *Propaganda Analysis* as follows:

1. Name-Calling: associating people or policies with good or bad things or names.
2. Glittering Generalities: associating objects with vague concepts like “freedom, justice, truth, education, democracy in a large, general way.”
3. Transfer: linking objects with the “authority, sanction, and prestige” of national or religious symbols.
4. Testimony: reliance on endorsements from elites like business leaders or celebrities.
5. Plain Folks: associating oneself or a subject with “ordinary people” or “the people” broadly.
6. Card Stacking: selectively elevating and omitting facts to spin issues.
7. Bandwagon: appeals to crowd mentality or reliance on peer pressure.

23 Sproule, J. Michael. 2001. “Authorship and Origins of the Seven Propaganda Devices: A Research Note.” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 4 (1): 135-143, pp. 135-137.

24 Quoted in Sproule, *Propaganda*, p. 135.

25 Fine, Benjamin. Aug. 4, 1940. “Hails Analysis of Propaganda as Enlightening.” *New York Times*.

26 Fine, Benjamin. Feb. 21, 1941. “PROPAGANDA STUDY IN STILL SKEPTICISM IN 1,000,000 PUPILS.” *New York Times*.

27 Dale, Edgar and Norma Vernon. 1940. *Propaganda Analysis: An Annotated Biography*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Bureau of Educational Research.

28 *Ibid.*, p. ii.



Yet the seven devices' simplicity was a double-edged sword. Inevitably, the effort to distinguish fallacious "propagandistic" arguments from non-fallacious, rational arguments revealed that political argument across the spectrum was textured with inaccuracies and simplifications, appeals to the emotions and non-rational responses, and argumentative shortcuts obscuring leaps of logic. Writing in *Harper's Magazine* in 1938, Barnard DeVoto blasted the Institute's principles as dangerously reductive. The IPA rendered propaganda so broad that almost any political speech could be classified as propagandistic under one of the devices. On its own definitions, the Institute's anti-propaganda program appeared to be "itself a carrier of propaganda."<sup>29</sup> Nor, DeVoto noted, could the IPA justify why such ham-handedly rational political speech might be preferable to other more expressive forms of communicating.<sup>30</sup> These criticisms would dog the Institute throughout its short lifetime.

Going into the 1940s, the conceptual shortcomings of the IPA's analysis began to cast a pall over its successes in the classroom. After the IPA conducted a series of respected studies into domestic right-wing extremism and demagogue Father Coughlin, the Institute was torn over whether they were intellectually obligated to balance coverage by investigating leftist groups. Miller's subsequent reports on Communist Party activity dismayed liberal affiliates of the IPA. Going after the left, they worried, would "play into the hands" of reactionary elements within the U.S. government spreading anti-communist paranoia to identify "anything progressive or liberal with Communism."<sup>31</sup> The Institute did eventually publish an expose on the most prominent of these groups, the nascent House Un-American Activities Committee, in January 1940. The article attracted the Committee's attention a year later, and anti-communist investigators briefly launched an inquiry into what they described as the IPAs "frankly left-wing" activities.<sup>32</sup> The investigation was little more than a hatchet job and was quickly dropped.<sup>33</sup> But the incident shattered any illusions from within and without that the IPA was somehow above or outside the politics of its time. In other words, the IPA's claim that the tools of logic could be used to clarify once and for all the distinction between propagandistic language and some sort of ostensibly politically neutral language was unsustainable.

This awkward even-handedness became a more substantial problem

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29 DeVoto, Bernard. June 1938. "The Fallacy of Excess Interpretation." *Harper's Magazine*, pp. 109-110.

30 Throughout 1938, the IPA fell victim to the very problems of non-rational, emotional, and interested speech it sought to educate others about. The first outside submissions to *Propaganda Analysis* were "so charged in places with emotion" they needed to be rewritten. Board member Hadley Cantril, a psychologist researching the effects of radio, worried about publishing criticism of the broadcasting industry under his own name. And Good Will Fund administrators, fearing libel suits and under pressure from high-level business associates, pushed back against investigations into private corporations. See Sproule, *Propaganda*, pp. 139-142.

31 Sproule, *Propaganda*, p. 147.

32 Special to the *New York Times*. Feb. 23, 1941. "DIES SCRUTINIZES PROPAGANDA STUDY: Inquiry into the Institute for Analysis Follows Alleged Left-Wing Expressions." *New York Times*.

33 Sproule, *Propaganda*, p. 150.



when the IPA turned its focus to the war in Europe. In the late 1930s, Miller spoke out forcefully against German propaganda efforts to legitimate Nazi politics in America, and to sow discord by “break[ing] Americans up into dissenting groups.”<sup>34</sup> “The Institute’s educational efforts,” he told the *New York Times*, served as the “best means of dealing with real or mythical Fifth Columnists.”<sup>35</sup> But in the pages of *Propaganda Analysis*, Miller and his staff were compelled to strike a more balanced tone. In June 1939, one IPA article cast a British royal visit and exhibit at the World’s Fair in New York as attempts to manipulate Americans into supporting the Allied effort, controversially comparing it to British propaganda during the first World War.<sup>36</sup> In November of 1939, the Institute criticized the Roosevelt administration for “propaganda for collective action with democracies” and urged readers to be wary of “slogans and propaganda devices” deployed by the U.S. government. The next month, the Institute accused both British and German governments of deploying propaganda to blame each other for starting the war.<sup>37</sup> Early 1940 saw *Propaganda Analysis* editor Harold Lavine co-author the IPA-backed *War Propaganda and the United States*. In it, Lavine described Roosevelt as “inevitably the nation’s most active and significant propagandist” whose appeal was powered by the newfound ability “to send his words winging around the globe” via radio.<sup>38</sup> While Miller and board member E.C. Lindeman drew a distinction between propaganda in free and fascist states in their foreword,<sup>39</sup> the book directed most of its firepower at interventionist efforts and downplayed German-backed isolationist messages.<sup>40</sup>

In critics’ eyes, these attempts at neutrality smacked of moral equivalency between the Allied powers and Nazism. Columnist Dorothy Thompson lambasted the Institute’s project as “a remarkable hoax... propaganda [that] presents itself as an anti-propaganda campaign.” The overemphasis on manipulation, Thompson argued, served to cool, not enlighten debate: “runs the Q.E.D. of [anti-propaganda groups’] argument, anyone who tries to tell you there are issues in this war is a propagandist and probably in the pay of the British or French governments.”<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Lewis Mumford argued the “suspicion of passion” represented by the Institute’s rational demeanor

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34 *New York Times*. Nov. 28, 1938. “EXPECTS NAZI PROPAGANDA: C. R. Miller Says Hitlerites Seek to Divide Americans by Hatreds.” *The New York Times*.

35 Fine, “Hails.”

36 Many Americans still saw British propagandizing as the principle cause for American involvement in World War I. A November 1939 Gallup poll found that more Americans saw “America was the victim of propaganda and selfish interests” as driving intervention in that earlier conflict than any other cause. Gallup, George H. 1972. *The Gallup Poll, Vol. 1*. New York: Random House, pp. 192-193.

37 Sproule, *Propaganda*, pp. 150-152.

38 Lavine, Harold and James Weschler. 1940. *War Propaganda and the United States*. New Haven: Yale University Press/Institute for Propaganda Analysis, p. 47.

39 *Ibid.*, p. x.

40 The book itself was a large financial drag on the IPA, leading to two cancellations of the newsletter and a flurry of complaints and canceled subscriptions. See Sproule, *Propaganda*, 153-154.

41 Thompson, Dorothy. Dec. 29, 1939. “Anti-Propaganda Propagandists.” *Daily Boston Globe*.



had produced a “cold withdrawal from human feeling” that rendered it incapable of recognizing the “human devastation” posed by Nazism.<sup>42</sup> Even liberals like Max Lerner condemned the Institute for producing a “nation of amateur detectives looking for concealed propaganda in every effort to awaken America to the real nature of Nazi world strategy.”<sup>43</sup> These critiques extended to the IPA’s methods: political scientist Bruce Lannes Smith blamed the Institute’s blunt methods for producing an “attitude of generalized cynicism” that failed to stimulate moral reasoning about democratic values of openness and whether information was being used for good or ill.<sup>44</sup> Analyzing statements in terms of semantic devices “destroys their essence rather than yielding understanding,” argued William Garber: “The difference between Roosevelt speaking and Hitler speaking is not basically one of propaganda techniques, but rather of different views of life, of differing approaches to mankind, to human dignity.”<sup>45</sup>

What the country needed was honest judgments about matters of principle as well as fact, undertaken in conditions of uncertainty, and in response to imperfect argument, about the right path to pursue. Logic-chopping was not in itself sufficient to equip citizens for this work. Rather they needed processes of social learning, anchored by norms of honesty, understood as an ethical, not a metaphysical matter. As the war escalated, this inadequacy of the Institute model became increasingly apparent. Fund overseer Percy S. Brown worried about “the repeated claims that the Institute itself is a propaganda agency” and that its detached coverage regarding the war gave “the impression that Roosevelt is as big a liar as Hitler.”<sup>46</sup> He pushed the Institute to pick a side and join a liberal pro-interventionist alliance of non-profits, but was rebuffed. By 1941, neutrality was increasingly untenable and the prospective role of propaganda analysis in wartime increasingly unclear. Four prominent board members resigned in the spring, either out of increasing conviction about the need for intervention or fear of courting further controversy. Six of eight invitations to fill vacated spots on the board were rejected. A proposed book deal with Harcourt Brace was flatly turned down: “As we see it, the whole drift of public opinion for the near future will be away from the critical examination of propaganda,” wrote a representative. “Frankly, I think we are going to see an increase in the extent of the voluntary censorship that already prevails in a number of fields and a growling [sic] feeling that propaganda is not to be analyzed but is to be acted on in one way or another.”<sup>47</sup>

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42 Mumford, Lewis. Apr. 29, 1940. “The Corruption of Liberalism.” *The New Republic*. 568-573. 571.

43 Quoted in Sproule, “Authorship,” 139.

44 Smith, Bruce Lannes. 1941. “Propaganda Analysis and the Science of Democracy.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 5 (2): 250-259. 250-251.

45 Garber, William. 1942. “Propaganda Analysis – To What Ends?” *American Journal of Sociology* 48 (2): 240-245.

46 Sproule, *Propaganda*, p. 162.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 174.



By fall of 1941, the IPA had settled under a cloud of political ill-will, shrinking revenues, and all but inevitable U.S. intervention in Europe. The remaining members of the board suspended operations indefinitely. Mather released a statement to the press on October 31 saying that it would not be “practical to attempt dispassionate analyses of the steps being taken to impress the country with the seriousness of the crisis” and that “Such analyses, however objectively carried out, would naturally be utilized by groups opposing the main trend of events.”<sup>48</sup> In the January 1942 issue of *Propaganda Analysis*, Mather signed off, adamantly high-minded to the end: “I am reasonably sure we could have obtained money from interventionist sources but we would have had to weight our analyses accordingly; it is possible, too, we could have gotten money from isolationist sources, but again our analyses would have had to be weighted. We could not solicit or accept such money and still maintain our integrity.”<sup>49</sup>

This case reflects how the challenge of political debate is never merely a matter of separating the true from the false, the manipulative from the persuasive, the pure from the propagandic. To focus there exclusively is to miss the fundamental difficulty of political judgment, namely that evidence takes on its meaning and significance under the color of particular commitments of principle. What evidence will be curated and brought into a political debate in the first place is determined by the moral commitments that give some matters of fact greater salience than others. Key collective political judgments concern the just and the unjust; the advantageous and the disadvantageous, and the admirable and the shameful.<sup>50</sup> Knowledge about the seven propagandistic devices may mean that citizens are not misled by specific demagogic figures, but it does not equip them to make sound decisions about how they and their fellow citizens should act, via the instrument of their political institutions. While the IPA’s mission and educational work was admirable in many respects, it is this latter work we must support and enable. To understand how to do that, we will need to dive more deeply into the relationship between social learning and democratic decision-making. We turn to that topic now.

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48 *New York Herald Tribune*. Oct. 31, 1941. “Analysis of Propaganda Suspended for Duration: Institute Here Fears Its Work May Hurt Defense Effort.” *New York Herald Tribune*.

49 Lee and Lee, p. 122. Miller continued to identify himself as a member of the Institute while testifying as a propaganda expert for some time after the Institute had become inactive. It is unclear whether he anticipated reopening the Institute after the war. See Starks, Louis. Sept. 17, 1943. “SAYS FOES EXPLOIT OUR RACE DIVISIONS: Clyde Miller Cites Japanese-Nazi Propaganda Based on Anti-Negro Discrimination.” *New York Times*.

50 This we owe to Aristotle. The realms of what is absolutely true and false belong to the realms of logic, not deliberation: “We only deliberate about things which seem to admit of issuing in two ways; as for those things which cannot in the past, present, or future be otherwise, no one deliberates about them” (*Rhet.* 1357a 13). However, for questions of what we *will* do, the tools of logic and science can only help us make informed predictions about consequences. But our predictive claims cannot a priori be evaluated as true or false. They must be assessed on a different set of evaluative criteria belonging to rhetoric: whether a choice is advantageous or disadvantageous, noble or shameful, just or unjust (*Rhet.* 1359a 5-7).



## 2.

# DEMOCRATIC KNOWLEDGE

One of the oldest, hardest questions of political philosophy is how to ensure that political decisions are grounded in sound knowledge and sound judgment. The question dates back to Plato. The benefits of sound knowledge and judgment are obvious. Just as engineers who know what they are doing build bridges that do not fall down, politicians equipped with sound knowledge and judgment (and a few other virtues like courage and moderation) may be expected to deliver prosperity and security, at a minimum, to their people.

But every form of regime is flawed in this regard. None can quite seem to guarantee delivery of this result. Take, as an example, monarchy. Perhaps a society has a wise monarch, who renders decisions characterized not only by wisdom but also by coherence and consistency. Yet what of succession? If a monarch gives birth to fools, what then? Or take aristocracies, regimes that are governed by a defined elite. The elite is a small, closed group. Much is invested in their education, yet what this education cannot do is forestall disagreement and splintering into different factions of opinion. The challenges of uncertainty in the political realm and the entanglement of personal and public interest ensure that disagreement will arise. Plato sought to solve the problem of the place of knowledge, truth, and sound judgment in politics through the education of “philosopher-kings,” but such a solution is imaginable only when rule is indeed concentrated in the hands of a single individual. As soon as it is in the hands of a few, or many, no known mode of education can prepare leaders in ways that eradicate the emergence of faction. Contemporary oligarchies, like China or Saudi Arabia, have only succeeded in keeping disagreements within their ruling elite deeply cloaked. Expert rule, while promising more refined sortings of truth from fiction and thus better judgment, cannot solve deep disagreements about how to apply that judgment in contexts of pluralism.

This reality does not, however, imply total epistemic relativism or a free-for-all where whichever faction has the tightest grip on power gets to impose its judgment. Rather it underscores the fact that the road to sound judgment in politics necessarily lies through a competition over knowledge. This is especially true in democracies. The challenges of information brought to the fore by the Internet age not best understood as an epistemic problem. They are not a problem merely of the need to cultivate expertise. They are better understood as a social problem, a problem of managing competition and faction. The vast range of fragmented knowledge that goes into democratic



judgment – what we call democratic knowledge – is itself shaped by the ongoing competition among conflicting interpretations. The Internet-age has produced conditions that make this epistemic competition ripe for *faction*, the usage of politics for the aggressive pursuit of self-interest at the expense of collective ends. This is our challenge. As the case of the IPA suggests, our age is not the first to need to come to grips with this challenge. Where the IPA wrongly diagnosed the crisis of propaganda as an epistemic problem, some other analytical work done earlier in the 20th century can help us clarify the nature of the work that confronted them then and us now.

The first and most important point is to recognize the difference of kind between expert knowledge and the sorts of knowledge that most of us need to work with most of the time in coming to make judgments about politics. In the face of the complexity of our world, we all use imperfect cognitive shortcuts to navigate it. Writing in the 1920s, reporter and political commentator Walter Lippmann suggested that we must recognize that the “pictures in our heads” can only rarely be accurate reflections of our social world: “At the level of social life, what is called the adjustment of man to his environment takes place through the medium of fictions... For the real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance.”<sup>51</sup> Lippmann’s insight was the social character of political knowledge. That is, that the contents of people’s interpretations of social reality were not freestanding, but were contingent on their social context, the information they consumed, and the designs of interested powerholders. Lippmann’s view about democratic theory’s failure to grapple with this fact has attracted sophisticated adherents for nearly a century – from political economists Joseph Schumpeter and Anthony Downs a generation later to “realist” social scientists in psychology and behavioral economics searching out the “inevitable limits of human cognitive ability in politics.”<sup>52</sup>

Lippmann worried that our reliance on cognitive short-cuts—biases, emotions that encode judgments, and the like—make democratic populations vulnerable to manipulation. This is the sort of worry that typically lies behind the effort to tamp down the power of propagandists. Yet the sloppy, imperfect nature of ordinary human reasoning also generates a different problem. Our reasoning shortcuts, which provide valuable day-to-day efficiencies in navigating our worlds, grow out of our immediate social environments and often represent social judgments tethered to specific communities of meaning.<sup>53</sup> In other words, our various forms of shortcuts are not idiosyncratic; they do not reflect the habits or proclivities of this or that individual. They are social. Consequently, when we confront settled

51 Lippmann, Walter. 1998. *Public Opinion*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, pp. 16-17.

52 Achen, Chris H. and Larry M. Bartels. (2016). *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*. Princeton: Princeton University, pp. 10-11.

53 In one classic example, at a Texas rally during the 1976 presidential primary, President Gerald Ford was caught on camera biting into a corn husk wrapped tamale at a rally. It wasn’t until after the first bite Ford was told the corn husk was not meant to be eaten, but as a wrapper. The incident made it to national news and was widely interpreted as not just ignorance of Mexican culture, but of the issues near to Mexican voters. Ford eventually lost Texas.



patterns of social division, we are also likely to confront different strategies for reasoning through social and political problems.

This explains why a given audience—grounded in a specific social context—can appear, to people who are situated in a different social context, to be manipulated by their leader. The symbols and meanings that work with one group may be transparently fallacious or illogical to another group. Political scientist Harold Lasswell, seeking to respond to Lippmann's worries, attempted to map the practice of opinion manipulation onto a wider range of institutions operating with and against one another in the effort to shape public practices of particular groups. He recognized that propaganda would be “conducted with symbols which are utilized as far as possible by elite and counter-elite,” but that its effect would depend on those symbols relationship with the “changing total context” of the audience.<sup>54</sup> Context was not an overarching totality, but rather “the standard meanings of the groups of which the individual is a member,” within which the “propagandist must redefine the significance of social objects.”<sup>55</sup> Lasswell refused to view propaganda in the pejorative light that it had come to take on after World War I and retains today. The perpetual influence of external actors on individual's subjective views was instead evidence that opinions were not freestanding or independent of the social and political processes that they informed. What Lippmann's account of mass opinion got wrong was that it wasn't really mass at all: it was a patchwork of perspectives shaped by group life and disparate social experiences.

Hungarian sociologist Karl Mannheim made a similar argument in the first half of the 20th century. Taking as a starting point the question: “How it is possible that identical human thought-processes concerned with the same world produce divergent conceptions of that world,” Mannheim argued much of our thinking was a product of social life, not scientific investigation.<sup>56</sup> Our interpretations of social life, history, politics, identities, even “ordinary everyday thought” were attempts at understanding the world from *within* the world and were thus “incapable of an absolute interpretation” outside of a particular framework of cultural meanings and experiences in which the interpreter was embedded.<sup>57</sup> More specifically, individuals' knowledge about the world incorporated the “crystallization of the experiences” of groups to which they belonged to make “coherent the fragments of the reality of inner psychic, as well as objective external experience, and to place them with reference to a certain complex of conduct.”<sup>58</sup> Granted that many groups existed and their experiences varied widely across time and space, many

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54 Lasswell, Harold. 1936. *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How*. New York: Whittlesey House, p. 325.

55 Lasswell, Harold. 1927. “The Theory of Political Propaganda.” *American Political Science Review* 21 (3): 627-631, p. 631. Lasswell, Harold D. 1937. “Propaganda.” *The Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences*, ed. Edwin R. A. Seligman and Alvin Saunders Johnson. Vol. 12. New York: Macmillan Company, p. 524.

56 Mannheim, Karl. 1955). *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Company, p. 8.

57 Mannheim, Karl. 1952. “Competition as a Cultural Phenomenon.” In *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge: Collected Works of Karl Mannheim*. Vol. 5. New York: Routledge., p. 194.

58 Mannheim, *Ideology*, p. 19.



worldviews would coexist at once. Persons “act with and against one another in diversely organized groups, and while doing so they think with and against one another.”<sup>59</sup> With the collapse of traditional monopolies of authority over truth (Mannheim had the Catholic Church in mind), political order had to grapple with “a multi-polar conception of the world which tries to do justice to the same set of newly emerging facts from a number of different points of view.”<sup>60</sup> The pluralism of views in the public sphere of a democracy flows from social diversity, not merely from, say, who has access to truth and expertise and who does not.

None of this is to deny that political leaders often traffic in misinformation and that at some points in time, our own in particular, we see increasing frequency of such behavior. Nor is it to deny that some remarks can be irrefutably identified as false, regardless of the community of meaning that one uses as one’s starting point of reference. The point is rather to call attention to the degree to which the opportunity to traffic in misinformation depends in the first instance on the existence of distinct communities of meaning and opinion within a society, and on the impermeability of those communities to one another.

This fragmentation of a social and epistemic landscape need not, however, doom a democracy to epistemic failure. Democracies typically try to convert this patchwork of perspectives into the basis for sound knowledge and judgment through political contestation. One of the most familiar aspects of representative democracy is electoral competition between groups for political office. At the heart of this is the symbiotic relationship between elites who seek public support in the struggle for power with other elites, and the mass of individuals who are dependent on political, intellectual, or media elites to transmit to them that information to they need to make reasoned political decisions. Political learning occurs as a reflexive process: Elite discourse entails, as one scholar writes, a “dual motive” to “educate constituents as they recruit them to positions that work to elites’ own advantage in an interparty struggle for power.”<sup>61</sup> At the same time, elites cannot conjure new worldviews from scratch. Rhetoric, another scholar tells us, is the process of persuading individuals to take new actions or adopt beliefs they would not have otherwise by connecting those actions to beliefs they already hold and symbols already familiar to them.<sup>62</sup> Representation (and campaigns for it) takes on a reflexive character, in which elite actions are taken in response to public opinion and existing beliefs, but also takes on an active role in “mobilizing” it toward new ends.<sup>63</sup> Yet insofar as we are dependent on elites for political information, our perceptions of the social

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59 Ibid, p. 3.

60 Mannheim, “Competition,” p. 207.

61 Disch, Lisa. 2011. “Toward a Mobilization Conception of Democratic Representation.” *American Political Science Review* 105 (1): 100-114.

62 Garsten, Bryan. 2006. *Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 3-7.

63 Disch, pp. 110-112, Mansbridge, pp. 516-517.



world will be entangled with their strategic agendas.

This represents one of the central puzzles of democratic knowledge: while harnessing diverse ideas gives democracy its epistemic value, the process by which those ideas are harnessed and the perspectives that are brought to the table themselves are enmeshed in modes of competition concerned more with winning power than with good judgment. How can these processes generate valid democratic knowledge?

One argument is that they simply don't. It is a long running concern of political scientists that the vast majority of Americans are astoundingly ignorant of basic facts about government. Whether this ignorance is "rational," or inevitable is beyond the point. For close to 70 years, survey after survey has found that while most voters can name the president at a given time, considerably fewer know which party controls the House or Senate, can name the three branches of government, or identify specific policies currently up for debate.<sup>64</sup> In a recent example, a February 2017 poll recorded that 35 percent of respondents reported that the Affordable Care Act and Obamacare were either different or that they didn't know, and 45 percent said that they did not know if the A.C.A would be repealed were Obamacare repealed.<sup>65</sup>

These numbers are, of course, deeply concerning. But the kinds of knowledge relevant to sound political judgment aren't reducible to knowing facts *about* government, politics, or policy. Will knowing about the number of representatives in the House or their procedure for bringing forth amendments on the floor be helpful in selecting a good representative? Such facts *themselves* seem irrelevant to the task. Nor is such factual knowledge necessarily indicative of good political judgment or well-formed preferences.<sup>66</sup> Political scientists and theorists have documented a number of ways voters make reasonable choice with only limited information. For one, some hold that citizens' swirl of ignorance and "nonattitudes" about policy balances out through a "miracle of aggregation," leaving us with a rational collective made up of irrational individuals.<sup>67</sup> Others recognize that voters achieve "low information rationality" by using a wide variety of heuristics, intellectual shortcuts, and background contextual knowledge to render

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64 Delli-Carpini, Michael X. and Scott Keeter. 1999. *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters*. New Haven: Yale University Press. Some suggest that vast ignorance dooms the prospect of popular democracy entirely. For an account that throws the baby out with the bath water, see Somin, Ilya. (2013). *Democracy and Political Ignorance: Why Smaller Government Is Smarter*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

65 Dropp, Kyle and Brendan Nyhan. "One-Third Don't Know Obamacare and Affordable Care Act Are the Same." *New York Times*, Feb. 27, 2017. [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/07/upshot/one-third-dont-know-obamacare-and-affordable-care-act-are-the-same.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/07/upshot/one-third-dont-know-obamacare-and-affordable-care-act-are-the-same.html?_r=0)

66 Druckman, James N. 2014. "Pathologies of Studying Public Opinion, Political Communication, and Democratic Responsiveness." *Political Communication* 31 (3): 467-492.

67 Page, Benjamin I. and Shapiro, Robert Y. 1992. *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.



complex political debates into more clear choices.<sup>68</sup> Heuristics based on past experiences that stand-in for more complicated (and costly) data about policies or platforms allow voters to make reasoned (if not fully informed) choices than they would if their preferences were wholly exogenous.<sup>69</sup> Elite rhetoric plays a well-documented and central role in political learning.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, a “constructivist” turn among some scholars has even seized on the idea that the contingency of opinion can serve a *source* of democratic competence rather than a symptom of incompetence. Legislators and political elites, in this view, take on an “active” role “in searching out and sometimes creating” attitudes and perceptions of social problems, values, and political vision.<sup>71</sup>

As these points suggest, the quality of democratic judgments is not reducible to the possession of facts about government or current politics. As Aristotle notes, so far as politics deals with action – choices that we *may* make – it is concerned with the indeterminate domain of judgment rather than the factual or logical. Rather, democratic deliberation aims for the felicitous or advantageous, with an eye to the possibility that any apparent truths we hold in the present may be in flux in the future. While knowledge of ongoing affairs and analysis of past decisions may be useful, they are only one valuable input.

Following this tradition, we identify democratic knowledge with the diversity of understandings that underlie political action in democratic life: facts about government and current affairs, yes, but also the full range of perspectives held by civic actors about how to solve problems, their evaluations of the status quo, perspectives about political events, and their full practical judgment. Democratic knowledge is knowledge about democratic life that is drawn from practical experience living in a democratic society. Philosopher Hilary Putnam uses a similar term of “social intelligence,” of the collection of each individual’s “ability to plan conduct, to learn relevant facts, to make experiments, and to profit from the planning, the facts, and

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68 Popkin, Samuel L. 1994. *The Reasoning Voter: Communication and Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

69 Popkin, pp. 44-71. See also Lupia, Arthur, and McCubbins, Mathew D. (1998). *The Democratic Dilemma: Can Citizens Learn What They Really Need To Know?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Kuklinski, James H., Paul J. Quirk, Jennifer Jerit, and Robert F. Rich. (2001). “The Political Environment and Citizen Competence.” *American Journal of Political Science* 45 (2): 410-424.

70 Zaller, John. 1992. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

71 Mansbridge, Jane. 2003. “Rethinking Representation.” *American Political Science Review* 97 (4): 515-528. Urbinati, Nadia. 2006. *Representative Democracy: Principles and Genealogy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Stone, Deborah. 2012. *The Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision-Making*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company. Russell Hardin argues that the contingency and elite dependence of public opinion only increases the incentive to remain uninformed, as it weakens the notion that informed voting could produce government responsive to established public interests or mandates. From this standpoint, ignorance is still “almost logically deducible from the nature of knowledge and its role in democracy.” And yet, while Hardin’s view importantly reflects the social character of information in democratic systems, it still relies on a straightforward principal-agent model of democratic representation that neglects the plurality of institutions that shape and structure discourse. Hardin, Russell. 2000. “Democratic Epistemology and Accountability.” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 17 (1): 110-127.



the experiments.”<sup>72</sup> Profit here does not refer to material benefit accrued through the exercise of these faculties, but, in a Deweyan sense, to an expansion of those faculties through experimentation and use. Democratic knowledge, in our sense, includes also the diverse array of processes through which we come to know what we know and our place as knowers in a social system, all linked up in the process of that knowledge’s application and the updating of that knowledge by accounting for new information and the unforeseen consequences of our actions. Scholars Page and Shapiro argue that, when taken in aggregate, “collective public opinion as measured in surveys tends to be based on, and responsive to, all available information.” While it’s “pure fantasy” that most Americans have detailed knowledge of or positions on most policy questions, “many people [are] exposed to bits and pieces of advocacy and expertise” and use “these scraps of information to form a tentative opinion.” While individuals may get things wrong or be swayed by misinformation, in aggregate, “so long as these errors are randomly distributed, [they] will make use of all available information and choose the appropriate policies.”<sup>73</sup>

As important is what counts as relevant information. It need not be *about* politics or governments per se, nor does it need necessarily to fit our traditional epistemological or scientific understanding of what even *counts* as knowledge. Friedrich Hayek famously argued that great deal of relevant information for organizational and distributional questions was the “knowledge of particular circumstances of time and place” that individuals relied on when making economic choices.<sup>74</sup> This knowledge could not be systematized, centralized, or known to a “single mind” precisely because it was directly connected to individuals’ personal experiences. The chief problem of social systems, he argued, was “the utilization of knowledge not given to anyone in its totality.”<sup>75</sup> John Dewey argued that it was the inclusion of those who are affected by a problem, and thus had unique insight, that made democracy better at defining and solving problems than groups of experts: “The man who wears the shoe knows best that it pinches and where it pinches, even if the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be remedied.”<sup>76</sup> Similarly, theorists of low-information rationality have shown how local experiences – changes in the price of gas, local news stories, and conversations with neighbors – contain valuable information for making reasoned choices.

It was majoritarian democracy’s great innovation to turn this irreducible competition among ideas and the circular process of social learning into

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72 Putnam, Hillary. (1989). “A Reconsideration of Deweyan Democracy.” *Southern California Law Review* 63 (6): 1971-1697, p. 1683.

73 Page and Shapiro, pp. 18-19, 26.

74 Hayek, F. A. 1945. “The Use of Knowledge in Society”. *American Economic Review* 35 (4): 519-530, pp. 521-522; Hayek, F. A. 2002. “Competition as a Discovery Procedure.” *Quarterly Journal of Austrian Economics* 5 (3): 9-23.

75 Hayek, “Use of Knowledge,” p. 520.

76 Dewey, John. 1954. *The Public and its Problems*. Chicago: Swallow Press, p. 207.



a centripetal force. Strategic competition for majority support produces rational incentives for political actors, in Rawls' words, "to move out of the narrower circle of their own views and to develop political conceptions in terms which they can explain and justify their preferred policies to a wider public so as to put together a majority."<sup>77</sup> The most basic task of social learning in a democracy is to help dissolve the force of faction. By attending to what their audiences already know, political leaders, *if they are oriented toward truth-seeking and honesty*, can acquire real nuggets of knowledge about the social world. This dynamic constitutes the *democratic* character of elite competition because it forces elites to account reflexively for their own interests and to unify them with the interests of those whom they seek to represent as well as requiring them to learn from the experiential knowledge of those whom they represent.<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, this convergent tendency gives incentive toward generating shared grounds of discourse. Elites are encouraged to communicate in speech made within a framework of shared understandings that aims at "agreement that terminates in the intersubjective mutuality of reciprocal understanding."<sup>79</sup> More simply, competitors for public support are encouraged to speak in terms likely to be acceptable and understandable to at least a majority of people rather than in the jargon of particular communities. So far as competition is constitutive of knowledge in shaping how meanings circulate and relate to one another in social context, this in turn helps shape a shared, and ideally public, basis for understanding. Democracy thus offers a means of mediating what first looks like irresolvable epistemic pluralism by harnessing the diversity of knowledge toward shared interests and understanding through ongoing, but limited, competition. It is in the emergence of this idea – that multiple ethical-political worldviews backed by organized and interested, though shifting, political alliances could peacefully coexist in ongoing competition – that historically marked the emergence of modern party-based democracy.<sup>80</sup>

What we have sketched so far are the basic principles that are supposed to yield democratic decision-making based on sound knowledge and sound judgment. Political leaders, who have some sort of commitment to knowledge-seeking and honesty, will derive genuine knowledge from the social perspectives of differentiated communities of citizens; then, as they compete with other political leaders, they will connect that valid social knowledge, as well as expert knowledge from their policy advisors, to diagnoses of social circumstances that transcend minoritarian or factionalized viewpoints and integrate the epistemic perspectives of different subsets of the community. This was an idea first articulated by James Madison. Yet he did not merely sketch the abstract features of the processes

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77 Rawls, John. 2005. *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 165.

78 Urbinati, pp. 39-52.

79 Habermas, Jürgen. 1979. "What is Universal Pragmatics?" In *Communication and the Evolution of Society*. Boston: Beacon Press, p. 3.

80 Hofstadter, Richard. 1969. *The Idea of a Party System: The Rise of Legitimate Opposition in the United States*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Selinger, Jeffery S. 2016. *Embracing Dissent: Political Violence and Party Development in the United States*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.



necessary to achieve sound democratic knowledge. He also delineated concrete mechanisms that might support and sustain such processes. As we shall see, the problem that we currently face is that the mechanisms that Madison identified as having the potential to support processes such as we have laid out above may no longer operate. While we can still see the shape that healthy processes of democratic knowledge-gathering and sorting should take, the institutional infrastructure that can support those processes has begun to erode. We turn now to Madison's view.



## 3.

# MADISON AND THE GEOGRAPHY PROBLEM

The problem that faced Madison in 1787 is a familiar one in the age of the internet. How can a popular political system marked by profound epistemic and social divisions maintain cohesion without resorting to despotism? Anti-Federalists dissenters argued that the idea that such a pluralistic country could be “reduced to the same standard of morals, or habits, and of laws, is in itself an absurdity.”<sup>81</sup> The “insensible and irresistible influence” of personal experience and interest rendered the Anti-Federalists skeptical of all but the most narrowly descriptive representation and weakest central government.<sup>82</sup> As Gordon Wood has argued, the Anti-Federalists viewed American society as literally “fragmented with interests.”<sup>83</sup> Indeed, rather than an integrated melting pot of viewpoints, the fledgling country was still very much a geographical patchwork of religious and ethnic clusters, and access to information was heavily dependent on one’s physical location.<sup>84</sup> The Anti-Federalists thus feared that centralized decision-making would “be hidden from the yeomanry of the country,” and that profound geographic-epistemic divisions would hamper the potential for collective action, as “The people in Georgia and New-Hampshire would not know one another’s mind.”<sup>85</sup>

The asymmetric geographic distribution of information, interests, and worldviews weighed on Madison. Most enfranchised men’s experiences and knowledge were limited to the local context of what they immediately knew – their town, state, occupation, religious group, and so on. Their reasoned judgment would be just as parochial and diverse: “As long as the reason of man continues fallible, and he is at liberty to exercise it, different opinions will be formed.” This presented Madison with a paradox: This diversity of opinions was “insuperable obstacle to a uniformity of interests,” but it was the “first object of government” to protect the freedoms of thought that generated

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81 Agrippa 4.6.17. All citations of Anti-Federalist writings are taken from Storing, Herbert J. 1981. *The Complete Anti-Federalist*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Each piece is cited using Storing’s reference numbers indicating volume, location in volume, and paragraph.

82 Centinel 2.7.140.

83 Wood, Gordon S. 1991. *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*. New York: Vintage Books, p. 258.

84 Stark, Rodney and Roger Finke. 1988. “American Religion in 1776: A Statistical Portrait.” *Sociological Analysis* 49 (1): 39-51. Bimber, Bruce. 2003. *Technology in the Evolution of Political Power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Starr, Paul. 2004. *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications*. New York: Basic Books.

85 Henry 5.16.8; Brutus 2.9.18



that diversity.<sup>86</sup>

What concerned Madison wasn't the existence of disagreement outright. Rather, Madison worried that the epistemic isolation of the vast majority of individuals would make reconciling their divergent perspectives impossible. Indeed, "one whose observation does not travel beyond the circle of his neighbors and acquaintances" would be unable to distinguish his or her private interests from "the common good of the society" or even those interests shared with others.<sup>87</sup> Physical and mental parochialism lead to faction, groups of citizens "united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, *adversed to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.*"<sup>88</sup> Madison conceptualized faction less as the existence of such groups, and more as a state of politics defined by the blind pursuit of individual ends at the expense of the common interest. Madison's famously diagnosed faction as a psychological phenomenon. He suggested "[so] strong is this propensity of mankind to fall into mutual animosities," that factionalism may be the *natural* state of politics.<sup>89</sup> Unchecked, factional political spheres would linger in a "state of perpetual vibration, between the extremes of tyranny and anarchy," before collapsing into one or the other.<sup>90</sup>

At the same time, Madison recognized that while the causes of faction were natural, its effects were political and institutional. A faction denied a majority "may clog the administration, it may convulse the society; but it will be unable to execute and mask its violence under the forms of the Constitution."<sup>91</sup> The threat of faction thus became a problem of aggregation. In a small, homogenous group, finding a single interest shared among a majority would be more likely. Checks against running roughshod over "the weaker party or an obnoxious individual" would be less.

Madison's solution was deceptively simple. The single-minded interests of faction coexisted in a broad patchwork of other groups and interests. Even the individual faction member might have a number of different identities and interests that reflected the multiple social roles (farmer, Baptist, etc.) they occupied. While the isolated person "is timid and cautious" in their opinions, if one modality of their experience was dominant, then that single interest could "[acquire] firmness and confidence in proportion to the number with

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86 Madison, James. 2008. "Federalist 10." In *The Federalist Papers*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 50.

87 Hamilton, Alexander. 2008. "Federalist 35." In *The Federalist Papers*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 167.

88 Madison, "Federalist 10," p. 49.

89 Ibid, p. 50.

90 Hamilton, Alexander. 2008. "Federalist 9." In *The Federalist Papers*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 44.

91 Madison, "Federalist 10," p. 51.



which it is associated.”<sup>92</sup> Thus, one could counter the effects of faction by “[extending] the sphere” of political competition to “take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens.” While “common motive” to faction would remain within this expanded sphere, “it will be more difficult for all who feel it to discover their own strength, and to act in unison with each other.”

Because such interests were distributed geographically, “the greater security afforded by a greater variety of parties” could be achieved through “a large over a small republic.” More specifically, this meant a smaller legislature, in which each representative was elected by a wider variety of groups and individuals. Epistemic diversity, ensured through geography, acted as a bulwark against “the vicious arts” of factional rhetoric, and incentivized the election of “diffusive and established characters” who could build majorities through moderating appeals across many groups. Their judicious “administration” of common interests would “touch the most sensible chords and put in motion the most active springs of the human heart” and generate legitimacy and republican attitudes through habituation (*Fed. 27*, 133). And by balancing these representatives against one another, even when a “factious leaders may kindle a flame within their particular States,” that spirit would “be unable to spread a general conflagration” due to the “variety of sects dispersed over the entire” country.

Madison’s majoritarian solution to epistemic pluralism underlies a vast number of ideas in political thought, from public reason to economic models of democracy to E.E. Schattsneider’s “mobilization of bias.” But it rested on a major assumption about epistemic competition’s reliance on a shared political geography. For Madison, faction was a distinctly spatial phenomenon – the product of the historical reality that group life was defined less by melting pot multiculturalism and more by a patchwork of isolated enclaves, as well as a social epistemology that placed a high premium on immediate embodied experience. While surely one could expect to receive letters from a relative in a distant city, epistemic circumstances were more or less spatially fixed. It was precisely because of knowledge’s sociospatial character that Madison was able to collapse together the scope of political competition with the problem of epistemic diversity. Epistemic diversity was directly correlated with the size of a territory – the more space incorporated into a given delineation, the greater the number of perspectives represented within it. Thus Madison’s institutional step: divide up national territory between fewer representatives to maximize the number of perspectives represented and minimize the potential for any one faction to dominate. By ensuring pluralism within a given social formation, geography was the cornerstone of Madison’s proposal and itself ensured a system of spatially dependent of communication and information networks.

Yet, Madison erred in treating a certain technological state of affairs as the

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<sup>92</sup> Madison, James. 2008. “Federalist 49.” In *The Federalist Papers*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 258.



baseline of human social life. With the technological upheavals of the 19th and 20th century, a very new picture of the relationship between knowledge and space began to emerge, locating the formation of perspective in the interplay between immediate experience and indirect abstraction. Increasing social complexity brought on by industrial capitalism, communication technology and political upheavals in the modern American state brought the factional Madison mini-publics into more frequent contact with one another. Repeated interactions in turn generated broadened social networks, developed weak social ties, and, most importantly, cultivated shared experiences and knowledge. This expanded what social theorist Georg Simmel called the “capacity for abstraction,” that is, the ability to conceptualize abstract group bonds beyond one’s immediate experience. Through this ever-expanding national discourse, new identities, groups, and interests, less beholden to immediate geography, coalesced out of an otherwise fractured Madisonian patchwork. For Simmel, as with the sociologists that followed him – famously Gellner, Anderson, and Habermas – dispersed networks of communication gave rise to larger groups that were sustained more by shared intersubjectivity and less by face-to-face contact. Knowledge and interests were decoupled from the spaces that sustained Madison’s institutional balance.

For almost a century, this disentangling of geography and perspective inspired great optimism. While Lippmann and Lasswell penned their anxieties of a political age dominated by propaganda, John Dewey saw new democratic potential in the rise of despatialized mass media. Greater capacity for indirect communication brought on by the radio and mass printing (and later television and the internet) could obviate epistemic geography entirely, bringing about a “Great Community” coterminous with the state. As he outlined in *The Public and its Problems*, increasing connectivity would increase the “extensive and enduring consequences” individual actions had on “others beyond those directly engaged in them.” More access to information would make the social implications of individual action clearer, bringing about a newfound collective interest in controlling the mutual unseen influence individuals had on one another.<sup>93</sup> Geography would play a smaller and smaller role in how individuals perceived their group identities and group perceptions. Dewey writes:

Persons are joined together, not because they have voluntarily chosen to be united in these forms, but because vast currents are running which bring men together. Green and red lines, marking out political boundaries, are on the map and affect legislation and the jurisdiction of courts, but railways, mails, and telegraph-wires disregard them. The consequences of the latter influence more profoundly those living within the legal local units than do boundary lines.<sup>94</sup>

This newfound enthusiasm for a non-spatial information economy buoyed the first wave of enthusiasm for the Internet’s democratic potential. It

<sup>93</sup> Dewey, p. 27.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, p. 107.



was precisely the internet's decentralized and non-spatial character that distinguished it from past innovations in communication technology. Writing in 2006, Harvard Law Professor Yochai Benkler wrote that "Decentralized individual action—specifically, new and important cooperative and coordinated action carried out through radically distributed, nonmarket mechanisms as opposed to communicative strategies necessarily rooted in traditional market and property relations, are playing a consistently larger role in public communication, and that development ought to be lauded."<sup>95</sup>

These visions of egalitarian, cosmopolitan social spheres remain inspiring for the scope of their reimagining the participatory and deliberative vistas of modern democracy. Democracy as an ongoing negotiation between different worldviews appears to be most fully realized through them. Madison's vision of a popular politics defined by the tenuous balance among parochial and irresolvable interests at loggerheads with one another, resolved only by more or less being ignored at the highest level by disinterested elites, fades into the background. In its place arrives the possibility a public sphere in which learning and discourse are motivated not by personal experience or tribal bonds, but by rational argument, the giving of reasons, institutional learning, and the reflexive relations between representative and represented, unmediated by elite gatekeepers or institutions that anchor social learning.

But this despatialization of democratic discourse would have unnerved Madison: the technological and communicative developments that liberated democratic practice from geography and better provided for the harnessing of socially dispersed intelligence, greater representation of broad interests, and deeper realization of mass interdependence also removed the primary check against epistemic fracturing and mass manipulation of that knowledge.

Madison's solution to the problem of faction, famously presented in *Federalist 10*, remains a central idea in democratic theory. The vast geography of young America, thought Madison, would generate epistemic divides so deep that would make the identification and pursuit of common interests all but impossible. Individuals, unable to access shared information and communicate with one another, would be "more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to co-operate for their common good."<sup>96</sup> Madison's solution was to expand the scope of political competition so that each representative was accountable to larger number of persons, preventing any one group's interest from dominating and incentivizing winning epistemically diverse majorities. Political competition between viewpoints could encourage convergence toward shared understandings, if not consensus.

The fact is, however, that Madison's reliance on geography as part of the solution to faction no longer provides us with a sufficient foundation for addressing the problems we now confront. Geography is no longer a

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95 Benkler, Yochai. 2006. *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 3.

96 Madison, "Federalist 10," p. 49.



hindrance to coordination. That is, a key premise undergirding the original design of our political institutions no longer holds. Our generation has the responsibility of finding a new solution. The task is to consider once again what institutional architecture can anchor processes of social learning capable of dissolving, or at least mitigating, the force of faction.



## 4.

# NEW SOLUTIONS FOR AN OLD PROBLEM

Madison's strategy for resolving the problem of faction boils down to two concepts: division and collection. Division pertains as follows: Madison expected that the physical facts of geography would disperse communities of opinion, and produce obstacles to coordination for those who happened to share extreme views. Collection, on the other hand, was the work of representation. A small number of representatives would each embrace within their constituency a multiplicity of communities of opinion; this would force the representatives to serve a filtering, mediating, and moderating role. Guided by some sort of meaningful commitment to the truth, the representatives would extract the different nuggets of valid social knowledge from the communities within their purview, combine those nuggets with the expert analyses to which they had access, and generate diagnoses of the country's situation, their own constituencies interests and needs, and potential solutions, that rested on valid knowledge.

Geography no longer delivers the functions of either division or collection. Communications technology have reduced the costs of coordination and erased the function of division or fragmentation once provided by mountains, rivers, and valleys. Moreover, Americans have now so sorted themselves by party in residential communities that align with electoral districts, and parties have so aggressively sought to control districting processes to homogenize their constituencies that the processes by which representatives serve to collect, mediate, and filter a diversity of opinions and experiences have weakened.<sup>97</sup>

Consequently, we are in need of new institutional designs that will restore the functions of division and collection and reboot processes of social learning that convert a multiplicity of social perspectives into moderate, centrist forms of shared social understanding.

Here are a few ideas that emphasize either the process of division, the process of collection, or both.

1. We might re-institute something that looks like the draft. This might be a structure of national service that would connect citizens to communities of meaning other than the narrow communities to which they are pre-

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<sup>97</sup> Bishop, Bill. 2009. *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart*. New York: Mariner Books.



committed. Such structures would expose citizens to a broader diversity of perspectives while also requiring them to operate, collaborate, and make decisions in contexts that require processes of social learning to achieve an amalgam of views and perspectives. Such institutions weaken the practical force of our parochial ties—this is an analog to the principle of geographical division. They also build an alternative structure to political representation for achieving a collection and entanglement of plural views within a unified decision-making structure.

2. We might establish geographic lotteries for admission to elite colleges. Elite colleges serve up leadership cohorts for our society, including the experts who learn how to operate the institutions of our representative government. If our representative institutions are to continue to serve processes of “collection,” – gathering and sorting a multiplicity of views in order to achieve shared diagnoses and broadly convincing solutions – then prospective leaders need training in contexts that also require them to participation in such processes of collection. Admissions practices that accentuate geographic diversity might increase this sort of training in working across opinion boundaries.
3. Scholars have tracked a major shift over the last few decades in the life trajectories of students who attend elite colleges.<sup>98</sup> In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, students who attended Ivy League institutions, flagship state universities, and private liberal arts colleges, typically returned to their hometowns after college, marrying and settling there. In so doing, they wove together the cultural milieu of the college they had attended and that of their home town. This process simultaneously provided elements of division and collection. The leavening with experience elsewhere weakened the force of geographically specific bodies of opinion; simultaneously, the return of these elite collegiate alumni to their hometowns required an integration of their new perspectives with those of their neighbors, in a process of collection. Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the likelihood that such graduates would return home declined precipitously. Now, instead they migrate to the coasts, or other urban centers. Their education no longer supports the processes of division and collection as it once did. We might therefore seek to restore urban-rural bridge building, and other related kinds of bridge-building, with a domestic Fulbright program. This might be a system of financial aid in which, exchange for their college tuition support, students are required to return home after college for at least two years.
4. Transformations in journalism have undermined the processes of collection so critical to Madison’s model. City and state papers that covered state capitols, for instance, helped tie the knowledge that existed in specific towns and municipalities to a broader state level conversation about competing interests and the public good. As news organizations have folded, coverage that provides this sort of connective tissue has

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<sup>98</sup> Hoxby, Caroline. 2009. “The Changing Selectivity of American Colleges,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 23: 4, Pages 95–118.



dried up. We might seek substitutes through philanthropic support for partnerships between state-level think tanks and national journalistic organizations to support coverage of state capitols. Left-leaning and right-leaning think tanks continue to have active interest in the doings of state legislators. Journalistic interns might serve in rotation in think tanks on both sides of the political spectrum, while being mentored by staff at national news organizations. They might deliver stories to both the national news organization and local papers, and thereby help to jumpstart a process of collection by which a multiplicity of views enters into a unified stream of conversation.

5. Finally, we should look at new structures of representation that better fit our new despatialized conditions.<sup>99</sup> We might take seriously the Fair Representation Act recently drafted in Congress. This act would change the election rules for Congressional elections to employ (in most but not all instances) multi-member districts coupled with rank order voting. These two procedural mechanisms would result, in many instances, in districts that are represented by both a Republican and a Democrat. In other words, a Republican and Democrat would find themselves serving the same constituency. In order to do their jobs, they would have to work together to do the work of collecting, sorting, and filtering opinions just as Madison originally expected that a single representative would need to do. With voting mechanisms that would increase the likelihood of a need for this sort of cross-party collaboration, we would restore the processes that Madison originally thought were necessary for achieving valid democratic knowledge.

Would misinformation disappear if we could re-activate the processes of division and collection that serve to resolve, or at least, mitigate the problem of faction? Certainly not. But if we were to adopt reforms of this kind, then particular efforts to rely on misinformation to achieve political advantage will face a solvent that will weaken their power. The permeability of the boundary between communities of opinion generated by healthy processes of social learning would provide this solvent.

But finally, we must say again the most fundamental thing. While reforms of this kind can restart processes of social learning, and give our anchor institutions (colleges, universities, schools, and the media) a chance to revive their important roles in our society, none of these reforms will have traction unless we rebuild an ethical commitment to honesty.

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<sup>99</sup> Or we might, as Andrew Rehfeld suggests, replace geographic districting with a system of randomly assigned non-territorial constituencies so that representatives are held accountable by a much wider, more diverse group of voters. Rehfeld, Andrew. 2005. *The Concept of Constituency: Political Representation, Democratic Legitimacy, and Institutional Design*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



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