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# Facing the Future, Facing the Screen

Kristóf Nyíri (ed.)

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# Perspectives on Visual Learning

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## **Curation: The Digital World of Manipulated Experience**

“It’s relevant to our democracy, citizenship.  
We’re going to have to rebuild, within  
this wild, wild west of information flow, some  
sort of curating function that people agree to...”<sup>1</sup>

The basic character of propaganda, censorship, advertising, religious ritual, education, and similar social technologies is that they are ways of changing something internal, the way people think, or think in relation to a voluntary action, by something external. We have a long list of inherited experiences with such processes, some of which have been very effective. But we know from this experience that the actual effects of these social technologies are unpredictable, and that they can produce resistance as well as acquiescence. I will specifically focus on the puzzling idea of “curation”.

Curation is a form of censorship, with conscious or unconscious propagandistic intent, and operates at least in part as a form of subconscious manipulation, a hidden persuader, in the older language of Vance Packard. It operates by deprivation. But like the concept of ideology, there is a problem of explaining the difference between it and the rest of experience that affects thought, for example between indoctrination and education. We ordinarily operate with limited information, derived from limited experience. Curation is usually blandly described as a means of correcting for “disinformation”. But the concept of information is a poor match for it, and obscures the workings of curation as a means of producing internal change as well as the epistemic character of the change. But to see what the issues are,

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<sup>1</sup> Barack Obama, cf. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?416888-1/president-obama-delivers-remarks-white-house-frontiers-conference>.

it is necessary to review some of the relevant distinctions we can make now.

The notion of disinformation, unlike “information” itself is meant to be epistemic, or veritistic. The concept of disinformation implies falsity, but also suggests intentional fraud. It also suggests a model of action: that people presented with the correct information will behave correctly, and that when they do not, disinformation may be a cause. Correcting people, at least with respect to this cause of action, becomes a matter of curating the information they have access to. If the information is correct, and meets other unspecified criteria, perhaps including, for example, representativeness, curating is neutral: it is merely a way of eliminating a source of potential cognitive error. It would be “democratic”, if there was an agreement on what to eliminate. And among truth-seeking and abiding people, such an agreement should be possible. If so, the reasoning is, we would have an improved democratic discourse, and greater acquiescence to a world of fact. And by limiting information sufficiently, we would create a world of fact that is common to more people, facilitating actual agreement or reducing polarization. This is typically presented as a way of “saving democracy”, and as an alternative to authoritarianism, which points to issues in democratic theory itself. The implication here is that tacit or indirect control or influence by curation is not “authoritarian”, but that polarization, indicated by claims that are bigoted, “false”, or violations of norms of discourse, is authoritarian. This is a novel definition of authoritarian, but one rooted in a model of tolerant liberal democratic discourse.

This model is never clearly articulated: it is taken for granted that it is something like what is actually happening in the digital world: that people’s experience is shaped by informational inputs that range between the actively curated and the “wild west”, in which polarizing disinformation flourishes. When there is evidence that interventions, for example in the news programs people watch, actually matter, it is taken to confirm the general picture. And clearly there is something to the general picture. If there was not there would be no point to such established activities as advertising. But it is also the case that our understanding of the relevant processes in general is not

very strong, and that the evidence for how the model applies in the digital world is also weak. We can see that there are differences in the nature of different mediated or media experiences. We have less grasp of how any of them actually work.

The model is nevertheless useful as a starting point: we can apply some of the distinctions we are aware of in relation to previous regimes of mediation to the new digital regime, and notice differences. The place to start is with the concept of information itself. Taken in the terms of information theory, information is a neutral concept: it is simply a kind of input. The “dis” in disinformation needs to be grounded elsewhere. So to analyze it we are necessarily forced into epistemic questions: how does one know something is “dis” information? And is curation restricted to “dis” information, or does it work in other ways?

There is an immediate problem here: who decides what is fact? It is well-known that much of what is presented in science journals, especially in medicine, does not live up to standards of evidential quality, that pharmaceutical funding leads to biases, and that the funding system of science itself influences the content of science and its consensus. Journalism, similarly, is prone to ideological selectivity and bias. The idea that there would be a neutral agreement on what is “dis” information seems fanciful at best, sinister at worst.<sup>2</sup>

But the point of curation cannot be to simply eliminate false claims or non-facts. The range of possible knowable things is vast: all experience of individuals is a small sample of a massive universe. The explicit aim of curation is to control this sample. Obama, in a recent speech, commented: “Forty years ago, if you were a conservative in rural Texas”, he said, “you weren’t necessarily offended by what was going on in San Francisco’s Castro District because you didn’t know what was going on.”<sup>3</sup> These are polarizing, but presumably irrelevant facts, toxic to “democracy”. If the aim is to eliminate

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<sup>2</sup> T. R. Clancy, “[Whose Democracy Is This, Anyway?](#)”, *American Thinker*, March 16, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. <https://cyber.fsi.stanford.edu/events/challenges-democracy-digital-information-realm>.

the elements that contribute to polarization, the relevant concepts differ. Disinformation, even if it could be defined neutrally, or by “agreement,” is not enough. More needs to be suppressed.

The term “authoritarian” is especially inapt in this context, for an intrinsic reason. The strategy is a “behavioral intervention”, i.e a way of manipulating the external environment in such a way as to produce change without either conscious consent or coercion. The intervention is a “nudge” that relies on the ingrained heuristics of the recipient. But the heuristics in question are precisely about authority. The ordinary recipient accepts the news, the authority of experts, the authority of the state in defining reality, and of schools. Those who accept authority do not require an intervention. The target of the intervention is the people who reject or are suspicious of authority, and are thus vulnerable to disinformation or non-standard, meaning unacceptable, sources. The solution is restricting the available choices in news, experts, and schools, so that the recipients’ heuristics have a curated sample to operate on, and are not fed by non-standard sources. The goal is to transform the recipient.

Foucault had a term for this kind of behavioral intervention: normalization. As Michał Krzyżanowski summarizes him, quoting Dianna Taylor,

... the key idea of the normalizing process is not to create its vision/image as the overarching or dominant one, but to normalize it in a much more obscure or opaque manner. Normalization is, hence, a process both introducing as well as obscuring norms, whilst practices which carry new norms “become embedded to the point where they are perceived not as a particular set of prevailing norms, but instead simply as ‘normal’, ‘inevitable’.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Michał Krzyżanowski, “Normalization and the Discursive Construction of “New” Norms and “New” Normality: Discourse in the Paradoxes of Populism and Neoliberalism”, *Social Semiotics*, 2020, p. 7, and Dianna Taylor, “Normativity and Normalization”, *Foucault Studies* 7, 2009, pp. 45–63, the quoted passage on p. 47.

For an individual to accept the “normal” that has been designed for him or her by a behavioral intervention is, on the superficial and conscious level, to abide by the norms of democratic discourse. On the deeper level the goal is to make them fail to see them as norms at all – and thus to be unable to reject them. The intervenor or designer emphatically does not abide by these norms or practices, but stands above and outside these norms as their enforcer, simply because of the technology of enforcement.

The equality of control of the discussion that exists in face to face exchange, or the less equal exchange of political campaigns and discourse, is replaced by the censorship of curation. Thus the digital world, the designed or curated world rather than the wild west, raises a familiar question: who decides? When Obama speaks of an agreement, it is clearly not intended as an agreement between polarized sides, or even as an explicit agreement, but as one which overcomes polarization by way of curation. His audience is tech executives who share his political tropisms. The kind of control that is envisioned is not the kind that can be codified in law, but depends on constant revision by the enforcers. The agreement on the new “norms” pre-exists tacitly. For them the message is clear, and he makes it clear as well: hide that which triggers polarization and lack of deference to the “correct” authorities. Deference in this sense is not overtly authoritarian: the manipulation is opaque, and the change is experienced as voluntary. But experience betrays us here. And this raises new questions about the character of the novelty of the digital world, and particularly about its democratic character.

There is a basic question here, comparable to the older problem of ideology. Is all experience in some sense curated? Are we not each in the business of curating the experiences of others? It is axiomatic that no man is a hero to his valet, and that the front stage differs from the back stage. What else could impression management, for example, mean? But there is a difference between the powers of the individual to curate and those in control of social media of the state. To note this is also to raise the question of equality, and therefore of “democracy”. In what meaningful sense is curated normalization “democratic”? It relies on what it takes to be a powerful

method of intervention that differs from the mere provision of “information” in a “wild” or ungoverned arena. And it attempts to provide the norms for this arena, but in an opaque way. But it is controlled by the few and imposed on the many.

In the face of this raw fact, the issue is agreement: the intervention is needed and justified because there is neither agreement nor adherence to the right norms. It is taken for granted that the disagreement that threatens democracy cannot be resolved otherwise. So we need new norms or the enforcement of norms – that is to say the transformation of informal norms sustained by tacit agreement into enforcement. But without “agreement” in a democratic sense, the result is mere imposition by a “people” other than the “people” of democratic procedure and representation. And there are obvious limits to the idea of democratic governance of highly technical matters – algorithms, rules that are enforced by people exercising judgement, and so forth.

But there is also a more fundamental, issue: can the problem of discourse in the digital sphere, even if we could agree on what the problem was, be resolved by curation? Put differently, what are the limits of the curation of the digital? The model with which we began assumed the efficacy of these reforms. But we know from the experience of the Soviet regime, with which the new digital censorship regime is often compared, that there are limits – perhaps limits of human nature which even the Soviets with their engineering of the human soul could not overcome, perhaps those deriving from interconnected traditions which sustained them against replacement. In either case, the same problem arises: there is a realm of personal experience apart from the official or digital realm, which has special, perhaps unwarranted, epistemic salience.

The Soviet experience in reforming the thought processes of its subjects through a change in the norms of public discourse, holds some lessons here. The effects were profound, and some people adhered fanatically to the new order. But not everyone was transformed, nor did the process always work as intended. The epistemic role of personal experience was to provide data points that allowed for dif-

ferent patterns to be recognized, which subverted the official line. People lived on two levels: the official and the personal and private.

There are parallels to the new order. Personal experience is not obliterated by the digital. It may not allow for the intersubjective validation provided by social media. But it is a brake on its epistemic power. So is self-curation: the personal selection of digital environments with which to interact and engage. The opacity of the processes is another brake: methods of external control do not produce entirely predictable internal results. And we understand far less about the new methods and their effects than the old ones. Indeed, the attempt at control in conjunction with the reality of conflicting personal experience may polarize to a greater extent than leaving the west wild.