Cautious Hope Regarding Information, Misinformation, and Disinformation

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As Philosophy of Education presidents before him have done, in his Presidential Address AG Rud carefully assessed a significant issue in our landscape, encouraged us to take it seriously, and invited us to take action.[1] I employ my role as his respondent to affirm, deepen, and extend his call, but also to provide some assurance and direction as we do so.

CULTIVATING CAUTIOUS HOPE

Rud noted that when initially tackling the topic of information, misinformation, and disinformation, he first experienced naïve hope, then despair, then cautious hope. Naïve hope is a form of wishful thinking, where we optimistically and passively believe that things will get better. It keeps us from fully seeing and understanding reality, including significant obstacles we face, which can lead us to not only a distorted view of the world, but also into deceiving ourselves. Some of us likely did naively believe that the problems of mis/disinformation and related phenomenon would pass, perhaps with careful use of social media literacy, increased identification, and regulatory squelching of spreading disinformation online, or changes in political leadership. Some may have thought that surely our fellow citizens would snap out of being easily duped. And some of us may have placed our naïve hope in heroic political figures, seeking for them to do the work for us, thereby turning over our agency and ignoring our complicity.

Rather than just languishing in naïve hope, Rud started, as philosophers of education tend to do, by trying to learn more. Once he better understood how mis/dis/information work, he moved into despair, as he came to more fully see the size and complexity of the obstacles we face, including how they are exacerbated by social media and bad leaders, but also how they are exacerbated by some of the worst tendencies in nearly all of us. The task before him felt huge and maybe even impossible to tackle. Despair grows when we feel stuck and are unsure how to proceed, when we find ourselves in what Dewey

would call "indeterminate situations." And a particular form of political despair grows when we don't see enough political will or action to address major public problems, such as the spread of disinformation and the threats it poses to democracy. That state can lead us to doubt our ability to address obstacles and may undermine our ability to do so. I'm grateful, though, that Rud did not give in to the sorts of cynicism or apathy that entice those in despair because they encourage a withdrawal from public effort. As I have warned elsewhere, "Cynicism functions as a distancing maneuver, separating citizens from each other, from democratic institutions, and from civil organizations, where visions of an improved world and action to achieve it tend to occur."[2] Instead, Rud cultivated a form of cautious hope by drawing us to our professional organization as a place to do important public work together on matters of information.

I suspect that a significant source of that hope arose from his participation in Philosophy of Education Society (PES) events related to the conference topic. These events provided a space for him to better understand the situation at hand, as he learned from his peers and from an array of resources across disciplines. But more importantly, our civic organizations and professional societies provide us a network to enact a form of realistic hope. It is "cautious," to use Rud's term, because it is aware of the depth and complexity of the problem and is leery of overpromising with the outcomes it envisions. Importantly, it is an active form of hope, best understood as a verb, "hoping," where we *do* democracy together as a way to attend to problems within democracy. Unlike the distancing of cynicism, cautious hoping brings people together.

In his Presidential Address, I hear Rud calling us to take up problems of information using our unique skillset as philosophers of education, but not only to talk to each other about these intellectual endeavors, but rather to learn from and work with those in an array of related fields, such as psychology, sociology, and political science. And I hear him calling for careful and slow work, reminiscent of a call we heard from former PES President Kathy Hytten, where we fight the trappings of academic positions that celebrate prolific publication, instead engaging in careful self-reflection and deliberative efforts that engage different publics.[3]

But, in his example of voting for mayor, Rud also confesses that he

sometimes doesn't want to spend the time that determining truth requires, instead he relies on the recommendations of friends and other time-saving techniques. We may have to rethink how we spend our time and to be more willing to give it over to our civic and political enterprises than our personal or leisure ones. And we may have to risk some of our personal safety in order to stand up to liars and to be skeptical of leaders, as he requests.

LOOKING BACKWARD TO MOVE FORWARD

Another way to cultivate cautious hope is to situate our efforts in a historical understanding of what has come before us that may inform us about what has been tried, what works, and what resources we have as we construct new solutions. I want to mine just a bit of that history for you now via earlier PES Presidential Addresses. Rud continues the work begun by last year's president, Michele Moses, who outlined ways that we might try to maintain and foster democracy in a post-truth climate by engaging in inquiry.[4] Inquiry is not merely a call to independent rational thought, but rather to shared public investigation, where we determine truth together. Earlier, Barbara Applebaum warned us in her Presidential Address that sometimes truth is not the point, but rather truth can be wielded performatively and through discourse to position people, sometimes distancing them from their own complicity in injustice.[5] As a result, she pushed us to consider the relationship between truth and discourse, and to recognize the limits of truth, as we foreground our ethical commitments. I hear this ringing in Rud's final words urging us to make our world more thoughtful and caring. Before that, Barbara Stengel recognized our uncertainty and our worries as she asked and encouraged: "So what is left to us as philosophers of education facing fear? Just one thing: to enable educators to say, "Therefore, we can …," to encourage them to be open to "permanent confusion" … and to act anyway."[6] Stengel's call to confusion and action harkens back to Ann Diller's metaphor of the torpedo fish. Diller might describe how we should develop new ethical sensibilities together and use our work to provoke each other to see information in new ways as we seek new perspectives on information.

In my work, I refer to this as pragmatist hope and I derive it from a Deweyan commitment to meliorism, the belief that through hard work and shared effort, things can be improved. I suppose it is no surprise that Rud and

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I, as two consecutive presidents of the John Dewey Society, would both draw on Dewey as a source for this sort of hoping. But whereas Rud, concludes, "Even though it is weak, all we have is our thinking and our rationality that can help foster a democracy," I am arguing that we also have action, inquiry, and hoping together, not just thinking and rationality to improve democracy. To sustain this cautious hope, our work must continue together well beyond the close of this year's conference. We must take up themes of dis/mis/information in our work within PES, in our conversations with colleagues, in our teaching of students, and in our inquiry, from thought experiments to empirical research studies. These forms of inquiry combat feelings of being overwhelmed by urging us to try out solutions with others.

Through such inquiry, we learn how to change both the world and ourselves, including how we use and misuse information. This may include nurturing our own intellectual humility and curiosity in the face of uncertainty, perhaps trying to attend to the "weakness of our psyches" that Rud describes as leading us to mistrust science or hold false beliefs. This includes acknowledging political biases within our ranks, most often from the Left, and how PES acts as an echo chamber where we confirm our views of the world rather than challenge or expand them (though, importantly, PES also serves as a likeminded community where we seek support and safety as we nurture our ideas and ourselves). We must grow our commitment to understanding and addressing this obstacle with ingenuity, creativity, and shared public work.

NEW WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING AND ENGAGING INFORMATION

Rud points us in important directions as we move forward, and I will expand on them just briefly here in the spirit of adding fodder for our ongoing work. First, he points us in a significant new direction that differs from how many of our colleagues have approached mis/disinformation. Sarit Barzilai and Clark Chinn have categorized four primary lenses through which education scholars have responded to the changes in our post-truth world.[7] The first, which they title "not knowing how to know," attributes most of the problems that have arisen lately to the inability of citizens to deal with digital information well, especially that which relates to matters of science. As a result, scholars

in this camp call for increased media and scientific literacy. The second, which they call "fallible ways of knowing," is focused on how cognitive limitations and biases distort quality reasoning. They call for teaching about the impact of intellectual shortcomings and epistemic vigilance. The third, which they call "not caring about truth (enough)," holds that our current problems result from citizens being insufficiently concerned with truth as an aim. In response, they believe educators should emphasize intellectual virtues and a deep commitment to truth. The final lens, which they title "disagreeing about how to know," claims that there is a loss of shared epistemology. Educators, then, should help students discuss those differences and ultimately, reestablish the "epistemic authority of science."[8] I appreciate that Rud is putting forward a very different framework, one that brings to the fore matters of ontology and ethics, and one that changes our orientation to information. A starting point for exploring this new worldview is to more closely examine the work of Luciano Floridi, whose groundbreaking informational ethics serves as a springboard for some of the ideas that Rud has put forward for our consideration and relates nicely to related ideas in bio- and environmental ethics.[9] His work may help us consider how best to become stewards of the infosphere, helping information flow meaningfully, and, as *stewards* suggests, with care.

Rather than information being something that we think with or something that helps us to develop knowledge about the world, Rud suggests that we should acknowledge information as a being.[10] Seeing information as part of our environment, not just the epistemic realm, may help us better understand how information impacts, shapes, and orders our world. Information is connected with other information in the infosphere, and those connections can reveal the tampering of mis- and dis-information. Loss of coherence and meaning can alert us to problems with information. We detect these, though, not only with reason, but also through our affect. It is this embodied, emotional response that makes us *feel* that information is valid or meaningful. Unfortunately, just as Rud notes the convincing delivery of Trump, affect can make the words and disinformation of undemocratic leaders ring as sincere. Or, as Edda Sant rightly warns in our post-truth era: "accuracy does not have primacy, sincerity does."[11] So, part or our work in making sense of information is understanding

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how such entities impact our affective responses and the forms of trust that derive from them.

Our friends in psychology and other fields can certainly help us. Rud confides that he now recognizes the "limits of reason," yet wonders if his ontological approach can lead to a needed "heightened rationality" and isn't sure. But should heightened rationality really be the desired aim? It sounds to me like he wants us to live with and use information in different ways, in ways marked ultimately by thoughtfulness and caring, in part because we affirm some value in the existence of information as being. In this regard, he may be endorsing a more affective and ethical relationship to information, where we see holistic connections between ourselves and information—an environmental ecology. Philosopher Michael Lynch explains that in order to work against the intellectual arrogance that is widespread today as people overconfidently assert their beliefs, we must shift our attitude toward the information behind those beliefs by changing what we value (most often away from power or tribalism in our polarized world today).[12] Rud points us toward a new valuation of information as an entity itself worthy of care. Perhaps this reorientation might usher in greater intellectual humility, working against some of the psychologies of belief that concern him.

Relatedly, Rud laments that growing distrust of science and the information it produces. Could it be that people aren't so much directly anti-science, but rather that personal experience and opinion have taken on greater heft, especially in our growing populist context? Populists emphasize personal experience as reliable information. Liesbet van Zoonen aptly calls this an "I-pistemology."[13] Notably, populists, unlike scientists, don't emphasize taking in information from others or careful study of the world. Instead, their focus is on personal expression and assertion—pushing one's view outward. These assertions often disregard how one is connected to or interdependent on others for understanding and transacting with the world. This form of I-pistemology, then, stifles other key aspects of democracy, such as relationships of trust and exchange. Rud might add that it fails to recognize the ontology of information, including our transactions and interdependencies with it. Whereas others have argued that what we need instead is to emphasize the social connectivity of

knowledge building and truth validation in order to tie epistemology with democratization, Rud takes us both further and in a different direction, drawing our attention to information as entities worthy of our care and as significant elements of democracy.[14]

Also in our current populist context, perhaps sincerity means more now that objective reports of scientists and droning conference presentations of academics feel detached and unrelated to the lives of typical people? Rud says, "We believe what makes us comfortable." Science and philosophy don't do that. For example, they tell us that we must give up some of our pleasures because they contribute to climate change that may bring about the distinction of our species. They tell us that we must question ourselves and the world around us. Perhaps, then, to consider the dual aspects of our field of philosophy of education, one of our tasks as philosophers is to figure out how to employ and speak philosophy in ways that ring true to the people. We might then overcome the "lacking" in our conference presentations and writing that Rud detects by figuring out how to better resonate with others who will take up and engage our ideas. Notably, that may not mean writing as experts—crafters or unique holders of information—but rather as more common users of it, and as stewards of it. As Rud describes the bodily aspects of ethical use of information, he notes that living precariously without basic needs being met makes people susceptible to falsity and bad ideas. Maybe part of our work within the world of education, as the other aspect of our field, is to help shore up the security and well-being of teachers (and students) so that they are not as susceptible to being duped, and so they can better model ethical use of information for their students.

Aligned with the modeling of teachers, we must consider the role of honesty in how information is detected, connected, and deployed. Our focus might more usefully be directed to figuring out how to use information in honest ways, rather than trying to ferret out objective truth, an endeavor that has long interested philosophers and scientists. Then we might envision pedagogies and curriculum that foreground honesty as one way to more ethically interact with the infosphere—to be accurate and forthright in our transactions with information. This is the way that I am personally taking up Rud's challenge in my latest work and I invite others to join me.[15] He has offered some worthy

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new directions for our work, and I have added others. I invite you to join us in exploring these new approaches, thereby building a cautious hope as we engage in this important democratic project together.

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10 I'm grateful to Tony Laden for his insight on how we think *with* information.

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