

Information as the currency of democracy

Recently, on my first visit to the Acropolis in Greece, I reflected on the importance of what the authors in this special issue have written. I wondered about the world of ancient Greeks and to what extent they influenced the philosophical and practical origins of the classical democracy which we revere today. Towering over the modern city of Athens, one can imagine some of the debates which would have taken place there and in the Parthenon.

Thomas Jefferson, a Founder of modern American democracy, has had a quotation attributed to him: "Information is the currency of Democracy." This attribution is central to the debates our society are having about privacy and what is true or not true in our news and social media. It is an issue that librarians have been discussing for a number of years – the authenticity of information sources and what constitutes authoritative information. Librarians and publishers have long cooperated on the release of content in books and journals after robust peer review and editorial processes. The nature of what a "publisher" is has broadened sharply recently to include social media, blogs and self-created websites. The impact of this new media was apparent in American politics and elections of late, where much disinformation was absorbed into the mainstream from which people form their views. In these ways, information has been poisonous to the sacred tenets of democracy where truth is so important and central to inform debate and decisions.

The modern country of Switzerland maintains a strong element of the democratic process as they decide which larger projects will receive public monies. It is a process which seems to be deeply embedded in their view of government and the role which ordinary people have. The creation of the CLIS robotic storage facility located out of the Swiss city of Basel is a concrete example of that process storing the lower used materials of the universities across Switzerland. In this way, democratic processes find different articulations.

Grayling (2017) has recently published a book on democracy and its crises. The book is a fine argument on the failings of British and American "democracies" but as Churchill said: It is not perfect but is better than any other system of government which are on offer. Grayling gives plausible recommendations for reforms, including compulsory voting, the abolition of "first-past-the-post" voting in favor of proportional voting, the breaking down of party discipline systems and the banning of betting on election outcomes. But his book does not offer a view on the subject covered in this special issue and that is, the quality and robust nature of the facts and knowledge on which all our democratic decisions are or should be made. However, he did recommend subjecting the press to "strict fact-check monitoring."

There are two aspects to this issue. First, who are these fact-checkers? Whose facts do they check? What authority do they carry and how are their facts authenticated? With the daily increase of plagiarism through lazy or criminal abuse of the work of others, comes the selective quoting of persons out of context. Both processes can be a deliberate attempt to obscure the intended meaning of words. There are many documented cases when desperate persons seeking honors or accelerated promotion have misrepresented evidence to gain a perceived advantage over rivals or in their own careers. It is always difficult to "retract" those false articles or books once published. They stand for a long time as testimony to the axiom "to publish in haste is to regret forever."

Second, there is the issue of the "facts" used by writers in the first instance. The quality content of publishing has suffered from the reduction in editorial staff for economic reasons. Publisher are not as interested now in the content quality of their publications.



Financial metrics drive publisher decisions where once quality only drove their decisions and the ample profits naturally followed for many years.

The publisher should be the provider of quality processes but they are mostly not providing that level of service any longer. They devote much of their energies to marketing and the creation of as much new business as possible. Editors seem to be charged with the maintenance of quality without the compensation, tools or staffing to achieve this.

Libraries and publishers have long had a symbiotic relationship. Their business and educative models have been intertwined. But with much of the published literatures now being “born digital,” it is increasingly difficult for the ordinary person to know of, let alone access the published literature. This is because of the locking of much of this content behind paywalls. The university libraries are the best endowed to pay for the access to the literatures and only registered staff and students can gain access to this content. Not very democratic. This is a most serious loss of informed views by the members of a liberal democracy. Public libraries do a valiant job assisting members of the community where they can but information which is locked behind paywalls, cannot inform the important debates of our time. The movement to create “open access” content and to create Creative Commons (CC) licenses allowing attribution yet unrestrained access, are crucial forward developments. Unrestrained access to the thought and research in democratic communities is absolutely necessary. The CC licenses allow authors to retain copyright over their words but they also allow readers to use authors’ work as long as it is attributed correctly.

Cicero, the famous Roman Orator and Lawyer professed that if you had a garden and a library you had everything you would ever need. He could remove the weeds from the garden with ease and had a very limited range of books on whose quality he could rely. He would have had a reasonably (for his time) large collection of classical Greek authors and so was very informed. Today, a Cicero would be unable to muster nearly as much of a library which to read by which to be informed. It is a fastly diminishing resource. More and more, we and our democracies are dead or deaf to that which is or has been written. The ideas and research which are being published or are in the published record are silent in our debates because they cannot be accessed. Our\ democratic debates about corruption, race, climate change about other global or local tensions are too often opinionated, but not informed. As a democracy, the currency we need is informed access to the published literature. Nothing less.

Steve O'Connor

Reference

Grayling, A.C. (2017), *Democracy and its Crisis*, Oneworld Publications, London.