Opinion: California needs a great villain

By Joe Mathews

It’s hard to find a villain who can bring Californians together.

That’s one reason why Charlie Manson’s death produced so many media remembrances. Manson represented the time, a half-century ago, when Californians shared more experiences—even fear of the Manson family.

Joe Mathews

Today, we’re too polarized to agree on who is the bad guy. Academically, we prefer to blame wrongdoing on systems, not individuals. Culturally, we’re so diverse that we don’t share the same references—never mind the same enemies.

Which is too bad. Villains may be evildoers, but they can also be galvanizing, energizing societies to protect the innocent, defend democracy, or address wrongdoing. And villains allow us to recognize the evil within ourselves. “There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us,” wrote Martin Luther King Jr. “When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies.”

Traditional sources of villainy aren’t producing the distinctive characters they once did. Mass murder, for

example, is now so routine that we've become desensitized to it. Is it just me, or do you find it hard to keep all the mass shootings and truck rampages straight?

The oversupply of villains is paralyzing. The mortgage mess and the never-ending fraud at Wells Fargo both involved so many thousands of low-level scammers and so many hundreds of higher-ups that it's hard to figure out who the biggest villain is, much less whom to prosecute.

California's power brokers of the past—from the lobbyist Artie Samish to Assembly Speaker Willie Brown—once played the villain with panache. But governance here has become so complicated that it's impossible to assign responsibility when things go bad.

And just when it appeared that Hollywood finally had given us a singular uber-villain with the revelations about Harvey Weinstein's predations, dozens of actresses came forward to tell us that such villains are as common as casting calls.

While we once could depend on the rich to live lives worthy of our contempt, today's Californians have come to treat the rich as saints— since, in this time of vast fortunes and a declining middle, our companies and our causes have come to depend on a few billionaires. It's worth noting that while California's Democratic politicians and labor union chiefs like to talk about their commitment to the poor, the person they seem to spend the most time thinking about is the billionaire political donor Tom Steyer.

Now at this point, I can hear 70-plus percent of Californians yelling at me: Haven't you forgotten Trump? I have not. And, yes, he's a bad guy, waging rhetorical and policy war against Californians. But he is an unsatisfying villain, for reasons both personal (his lies and offenses are too obvious and dumb to make him worthy of our opposition) and practical (we have to root for him not to start a nuclear war and kill us all).

No, if we're going to find a villain big and ambitious enough to fit California, we need to look in Silicon Valley, where the object of the game is not merely to dominate the world but to transform it. And if lives are disrupted in the process, so much the better.

When I asked people on a recent trip to the Bay Area if there was one figure whose villainy might be universally acknowledged, one name kept coming up: Peter Thiel.

The billionaire Silicon Valley investor in start-ups co-founded PayPal and was famously Facebook's first outside investor. These California companies have made him rich and famous. And how has he thanked us?

By attacking our institutions.

Thiel is a graduate of San Mateo High and Stanford who rails against government-backed schools and has encouraged people not to go to college. He's an immigrant who supported the anti-immigrant provocateur Ann Coulter and President Trump. While backing nationalist politicians, he bought himself citizenship in New Zealand.

Worse still, he has railed against democracy, called women's suffrage harmful to democracy, and argued that we should be ruled by our techie superiors. "The broader education of the body politic has become a fool's errand," he wrote.

This is monumentally villainous. A man who has the power and technology to reach deeply into our personal lives betrays utter contempt for most humans. Like so many villains, he's a false prophet, claiming to liberate people with technology while actually holding authoritarian views that would enslave us.

Thiel also writes that he "stands against … the ideology of the inevitability of the death of every individual." The notion of eternal life for some is tyrannical, but also

useful. When it’s so hard to find a durable villain, aren’t we Californians lucky to have one who intends to live forever?

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zócalo Public Square.

Letter: Make your opinion known about net neutrality

Bill Kingman

To the community,

The FCC (Federal Communications Commission) has a vote scheduled for Thursday that could have a deleterious effect on us internet users. This 2 1/2 minute **NBC report** explains it.

Our internet freedoms of choice and access – as well as costs – are at issue. While we public mere mortals don’t control the FCC – the commissioners are appointed by the president – the FCC is controlled by Congress. So, if you oppose removal of net neutrality, tell your elected representatives promptly.

Bill Kingman, Stateline

Opinion: Mourning the end of Pacific News Service

By Russell Morse, San Francisco Chronicle

My introduction to Pacific News Service came in 1996, when I was an angry teenager housed at San Francisco's Juvenile Hall. Officially, PNS was a nonprofit news service based in San Francisco, but it had many projects, including the Beat Within, which facilitated weekly creative writing workshops with the kids in the hall. It printed our work in a newsletter, a rare bright spot in our lives.

One week, Sandy Close, the brilliant and brash executive editor of PNS, came in lieu of the regular facilitators. After the workshop, Close grabbed me by the arm as I was shuffling out and asked me, "What's it like being the only white kid in here?" I shrugged. She smiled and leaned in. "Write about that."

It was my first assignment in a now 20-year career in journalism that has taken me from the juvenile justice system to the Ivy League, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a short bout on an MTV reality show.

It ceased operations on Nov. 30.

Read the whole story

Opinion: Placerville keeps breaking the law

By Larry Weitzman

The issue at hand is whether the city of Placerville can legally contract with a private contractor to issue parking tickets. The law has been clear since April 23, 2002, that it cannot do so, yet Placerville has continually contracted with a private company to handle this service. By flaunting the law – once again – the city is subjecting itself to being ordered by a court to refund all parking ticket fines back to the parking offenders.

Larry Weitzman

Placerville City Manager Cleve Morris's attempt at legal reasoning to explain why the city has not complied with the law has only dug Placerville a deeper hole as he tried to claim that the issuing of parking tickets is a "special service" allowed under a California Government Code Section 37103. He also made the argument that it was the result of a loss of an employee and alluding to the idea no one could be found to do the job (for the past 15 years).

How ludicrous and facetious. And what he stated as an excuse and his claim that the law allows the use of private contractors for the issuance of parking tickets because it requires "special" knowledge and training will come back to haunt him, just like what is told to every criminal defendant

on his arrest, “anything you say can and will be used against you.”

Morris also made the mistake of claiming the attorney general’s April 23, 2002, opinion only related to violations of the California Vehicle Code and tried to distinguish the opinion by claiming these are parking tickets which are merely a violation of a city ordinance. Such illogical thinking only makes the hole Morris is digging deeper. One must conclude that Placerville’s city attorney had a hand in this response published in the *Mountain Democrat* on Dec. 4. If that is true, perhaps Placerville could use a new city attorney.

First, as to this not being a Vehicle Code violation is simply adding to the ridiculousness of his arguments which is a charitable use of the word “argument.” It is California Vehicle Code Section 40202 that specifically governs the issuance of all parking citations and Section 40200.5 that allows specifically for the use of private contractors for the processing and collection of parking tickets and all California statutory law is superior and governs over city ordinances. All power of a general law city emanates from that statutory law. There is no statutory authority for private contractors issuing parking tickets.

As to the availability of California Government Code Sections 37103 and 53060 as allowing for the use of private contractors for special services, they were enacted for services usually not in the employ of cities like scientists, architects, engineers and such. What Mr. Morris didn’t tell you is that the last sentence of the section says, “It may pay such compensation to these experts as it deems proper.” The legislative intent clearly didn’t mean people who issue parking tickets.

Furthermore, the latter section, 53060, again talks of “special services” where it stated specifically in paragraph two of the three paragraph section: “The authority herein

given to contract shall include the right of the legislative body of the corporation (Placerville City Council) or district to contract for the issuance and preparation of payroll checks."

There is case law defining what "special services" are allowed to be contracted for and in the case of Darley v. Ward, the Court of Appeal stated, "Whether services are special requires a consideration of facts such as the nature of the services, the qualifications of the person furnishing them and their availability from public sources." The court held that management services provided at two county hospitals was a "special service" because it required expertise not possessed by county employees. In general, "special services" include financial, economic, accounting, engineering, legal, administrative, medical, therapeutic, architectural services, airport or building security, and laundry services. In addition to the ability to enter into contracts for "special services," there are several specific statutes that grant public entities the right to contract out for particular services. For example, a general law city may contract for financial, economic, accounting, engineering, legal, or administrative matters; collection or disposal of garbage; a ferry system; personnel selection and administration services; construction or maintenance of airports; and ambulance services. General law counties may contract out health care services; in-home supportive services; rescue and resuscitator services with the state; optometric services; joint operation of jails with other counties; and collection, disposal, or destruction of garbage and waste."

Quoted from the CPER Journal Online, "Why we can't contract out half our workforce," By Irma Rodriguez Moisa, Nate Kowalski, and Lisa M. Carrillo.

The law is clear: the statutory law has provided for general law cities the right to contract out certain specialized and other functions as delineated above, and the issuance of

parking tickets is not one of them. In another legal treatise written after the Costa Mesa City Employees Association v. City of Costa Mesa decision which said the court of appeal found that as a rule, California statutes prohibit a general law city from contracting with private entities to provide nonspecial services, the law firm of Kronick, Moskowitz, Tiedemann & Girard said, “As a general law city, city is bound by the state’s general laws. The court concluded that Government Code 37103 and 53060 limit a city’s right to contract with private entities. As these statutes have been interpreted over the years, they generally prohibit a city from contracting with a private entity for the provision of nonspecial services.”

The attorney general opinion of April 23, 2002, No. 01-1103 was correct as the latter case law indicates. The analysis of the attorney general as to the issuance of parking tickets not being a special service and not coming under the exceptions of the general law as provided by special and limited situations as defined by Government Code Sections 37103 and 53060 is absolutely correct. The case law and legal opinions are clear. Claiming that the issuance of parking tickets is specialized and should be included in the legislative intent and allowed under 37103 and 53060 is laughable. Most larger cities have employees do this job and the rate of pay does not indicate the job is highly skilled, requires a sophisticated education, higher math or what not. Any 8-year-old that can use an iPhone could do it. Mr. Morris’s claim they could not find anyone to do it just means they offered too little money to prospective employees.

As to Placerville’s current annual contract cost of about $97,000 being less than their estimate of having their own employee(s) is irrelevant. It is illegal for them to contract the service out to a private company by law. And by the way, for the last five years, the contract cost was approximately $144,000 a year, which is the information gleaned from the

city budget. They are not saving money, they are breaking the law and no excuse will suffice. Certainly not since April 23, 2002. It just makes the city look worse by ignoring the law.

Larry Weitzman is a resident of Rescue.

Editorial: Calif. surviving with plastic bag ban

Publisher's note: ***This editorial is from the Nov. 18, 2017, Los Angeles Times.***

It's been a year since Californian banned most stores from handing out flimsy, single-use plastic bags to customers. It was the first, and remains the only, U.S. state to do so. But guess what? In the end, this momentous change was not a big deal. Shoppers did not revolt or launch recall campaigns against state lawmakers. Food still gets to people's houses. Reusable bags did not spark an epidemic of food-borne illnesses, as some critics suggested they would. Consumers didn't go broke paying 10 cents apiece for the thicker, reusable plastic bags stores are allowed to distribute instead.

For the most part, Californians took in stride the sudden absence of some 13 billion bags that in previous years were handed out at grocery checkout counters and by other retailers of all sorts. Maybe a few grumbled at first about the inconvenience. But most adjusted quickly, perhaps because they intuited that something was not right about all those plastic bags hanging from trees, caught up in storm drains, clumped by the sides of freeways and floating in the ocean.

Read the whole story

Letter: Bring back clean mountain air

To the community,

The United States Forest Service admits it has mismanaged our forests for the past 30 years. Now they are experimenting with massive daily burn projects, while concealing and refusing to discuss their serious impact on our health. The general public does not realize that the USFS no longer tries to extinguish wildfires, but are actually turning wildfires into massive prescribed burns.

The surgeon general has determined that smoke is so hazardous to your health that it has banned indoor smoking, yet we must endure breathing the smoke by the USFS. Prescribed burns do not burn hot enough for the smoke to rise. Instead the smoke spreads along the ground infiltrating our lungs, lives and homes. If you are experiencing chest pain, arthritis, inflammation, headaches, burning eyes, sinus problems and breathing difficulties, it may well be that prescribed burns are the cause.

The USFS will not even discuss how seriously they are effecting our health, but run slick ads which try to brain wash the public that prescribed burns are the only solution. To learn how prescribed burning is effecting your health and methods of safer forest management go to Prescribed Burning Versus Human Health – YouTube.

To sign and email a moratorium request to halt prescribed

burning for one year until the USFS can develop a plan that will not jeopardize human health go **online** and look for the Urgent-Stop the burning link in red.

Marsha Honn, Snowflake, Ariz.

Opinion: The cost of devaluing women

By Sallie Krawcheck, New York Times

My first job out of college in the late 1980s was at Salomon Brothers, a trading house of cigar-smoking, expletive-spewing strivers. One day, I leaned over a colleague's desk to work on a spreadsheet, and heard loud laughter from behind me; one of the guys was pretending to perform a sex act on me. Almost every day, I found a Xerox copy of male genitalia on my desk.

I was not alone in being treated this way: During that era another brokerage house, Smith Barney, paid out $150 million in a bias and harassment case — known as the "boom-boom room" suit, named after a basement party room in one of its branches. Wall Street was a hypermasculine culture, where the all-nighter was a badge of honor and the ever-bigger deal was proof of one's status, and women were not safe, either emotionally or physically.

In the 1990s, I changed firms and was now a midlevel professional. The harassment shifted: Instead I had to rebuff a client, a chief executive, who asked me to join him — "Just you, no need to bring the rest of the team" — in his hotel room at 11pm to go over some numbers. One company rescinded a job offer upon learning I had a baby at home.

Read the whole story

Opinion: Populism shouldn’t have to embrace ignorance

By Daniel R. DeNicola

Public ignorance is an inherent threat to democracy. It breeds superstition, prejudice, and error; and it prevents both a clear-eyed understanding of the world and the formulation of wise policies to adapt to that world.

Plato believed it was more than a threat: He thought it characterized democracies, and would lead them inevitably into anarchy and ultimately tyranny. But the liberal democracies of the modern era, grudgingly extending suffrage, have extended public education in parallel, in the hope of cultivating an informed citizenry. Yet today, given the persistence and severity of public ignorance, the ideal of an enlightened electorate seems a fading wish at best, a cruel folly at worst.

Unfortunately, our current civic problem cuts even deeper: We are witnessing the rise of a culture of ignorance. It is particularly insidious because it hijacks certain democratic values. To begin to understand this culture and its effects, it is helpful to identify the ways it differs from simple ignorance.

Perhaps the most noticeable aspect of a culture of ignorance is the extent of willful ignorance. Ignorance that is willful may involve resistance to learning, denial of relevant facts, the ignoring of relevant evidence, and suppression of

information. Such ignorance is usually maintained in order to protect a prior belief or value—a sense of self, an ideology, a religious doctrine, or some other cherished cognitive commitment. False knowledge often bolsters one's will in maintaining a closed mind; but of course, it is only ignorance in elaborate disguise.

When the willfully ignorant are cornered by mounting evidence, they assert their individual right to believe whatever they choose to believe. This is a hollow and silly claim. Beliefs are factive; they aspire to truth. Moreover, beliefs affect attitudes, decisions, and actions. As the Victorian mathematical philosopher William K. Clifford remarked, "No one man's belief is in any case a private matter which concerns him alone." He proposed "an ethic of belief" and championed our responsibility to respect evidence for and against our beliefs. Though his standard of evidence may have been too stringent, we can agree that claiming the right to believe "whatever" exploits the democratic respect for individual rights by foregoing individual responsibilities.

A related characteristic is the rejection of expertise. Liberal democratic theory and practice have always elevated individual autonomy and independence, rejecting authority and dependency. They therefore have had difficulties with any relationship that yields individual autonomy—which seems to be involved in consulting an expert. It is true that the place of expertise in a democracy remains contested: We may yield to the expertise of the physician, pilot, or engineer (albeit uneasily); but we may be skeptical of the expertise of the economist, climate scientist, or critic.

Our ambivalence regarding expertise has increasingly come to be a rejection. The rise of social media has certainly contributed to this trend. Who needs a qualified film or restaurant critic when one can find websites that provide thousands of audience or diner ratings? But the implications go far beyond aesthetics: As a senior minister famously said

during the recent Brexit campaign, “Britain has had enough of experts.” Among at least a significant portion of the population, this attitude has led to a rejection of the traditional sources and certifiers of knowledge—universities, science, established journalism. As this attitude engulfs public life, it undermines the fragile but vital distinction between knowledge and belief, between informed judgment and unreflective opinion.

This epistemic populism seems radically democratic, but that image is an illusion. Democracy is, as John Dewey described, a moral climate in which each person may contribute to the construction of knowledge; but it doesn’t imply that each person possesses the truth. Moreover, one need not yield political authority to experts; it is epistemic authority—the authority of knowledge, skill, experience, and judgment—that is carried by experts.

At some point, the “wisdom of crowds” becomes the celebration of ignorance. Conspiracy theories, wild speculations and accusations, nutty claims, “alternate facts,” and pronouncements that are far afield from one’s knowledge—all these claim time or space on a par with accurate and important information. The politician who is ignorant of politics, the law, and history is seen as the person who will “get things done.” Some public figures wear their ignorance as a badge of honor. Let’s be clear: Ignorance is not stupidity, though I admit it is sometimes difficult to tell them apart in practice. And stupidity is likely to produce ignorance across a broad front. But one can be ignorant without being stupid.

Underlying all of these factors is the loss of respect for the truth. No doubt, many things have contributed: the venality of some experts, the public disagreement among experts, the continual revising of expert advice, and the often-unwarranted movement by social scientists from the descriptive to the normative, from facts to pronouncements. Religious fundamentalism, which stretches credibility, is another

precipitating factor. The postmodernist deconstruction of ideals like truth, rationality, and objectivity, also contributed to this loss—though I doubt that postmodernist treatises were widely read among conspiracy theorists, religious fundamentalists, or climate change deniers.

The irony is that these folks believe they are holding the truth. Indeed, I am not suggesting that we need to claim we possess the truth, firmly and finally; in fact, I believe those who make that claim actually disrespect the truth. Rather, we need to keep the ideal of truth to guide our inquiries, to aspire to greater truth. Not all opinions or interpretations are equally worthy. The concept of truth is required to separate knowledge from opinion; those who give up on truth, those for whom truth doesn't matter, are—as the contemporary philosopher Harry Frankfurt said—left with bullshit.

There are signs of hope. Many young people have a naturally skeptical, even cynical, attitude regarding information sources. There is a surge of interest in investigative journalism in various forms. The teaching of critical thinking has broadened to include information literacy: Many colleges now provide ways to learn the skills of evaluating informational sources and content, including statistical integrity. Scholars are giving new attention to epistemic virtues, capacities and traits that enhance the acquisition of knowledge. There is excited talk among feminist and educational philosophers of "an epistemology and pedagogy of resistance" that confronts willful ignorance and the "epistemic injustice" of systematically discrediting certain voices.

The danger, and by the same token, the hope lies in this truth: In the end, ignorance will lead to error. Serious mistakes and their consequences may be required before there is momentum sufficient to roll back this culture.

Daniel R. DeNicola, professor and chair of philosophy at Gettysburg College, is author of "Understanding Ignorance: The Surprising Impact of What We Don't Know" and "Learning to Flourish: A Philosophical Exploration of Liberal Education."

Opinion: Why Americans love diners

By Richard J.S. Gutman

Driving north on Highway 95 through Connecticut, I noticed a billboard advertising a local diner. Its immense letters spelled out: "Vegan, Vegetarian, Gluten-Free and Diner Classics." I knew a seismic shift had occurred when Blue Plate Specials—hands-down favorites for nearly a century, such as meat loaf, hot turkey sandwiches, and spaghetti and meatballs—were last on a list of diner offerings.

Over their long history, diners have been a subtle part of our built environment and also our inner landscapes. They are as familiar as the language we speak and the comfort food we eat. Everyone loves diners.

There really is no other building like a classic diner: long and low, sheathed in glass, gleaming stainless steel and colorful porcelain enamel; often ringed in neon and punctuated by a flashy, sometimes flashing, sign; going and glowing at all hours, day and night.

The first diners showed up 135 years ago when Walter Scott served affordable fast food out of his horse-drawn wagon in Providence, R.I. Patrons stood on the street to eat their lunches in the same manner as the customers of today's

ubiquitous food trucks. These eateries were constructed by wagon builders; gradually a specialized industry developed to mass produce diners.

These classic diners were factory-built, from the 1920s onward, and thus conformed to regular dimensions and proportions in order to be moved—by rail, barge and truck—from where they were manufactured to where they would operate. As a result, diners have a generic similarity to one another. But, because they are mostly individually owned, and made by different manufacturers, they have distinct personalities, based upon the people on both sides of the counter.

The diner interior is all business, where form follows function—"as utilitarian as a machinist's bench." The customer can see the short order cook reach into the icebox, work the griddle, and deliver the food in an astonishingly short amount of time. The back bar of the diner, beneath the glass-fronted changeable letter menu boards, is a tour-de-force of stainless steel or colorful tile, with a line of work stations filled with grills, steam tables, sandwich boards, coffee urns, multi-mixers, drink dispensers and display cases.

The "counter culture" inside diners is a reflection of their wide appeal. Commentators have long fixated on this, describing how this spirit manifests itself.

A 1932 article in World's Work depicted the all-inclusive range of patrons:

"The lunch wagon is the most democratic, and therefore the most American of all eating places. Actors, milkmen, chauffeurs, debutantes, nymphes du pave, young men-about-town, teamsters, students, streetcar motormen, messenger boys, policemen, white wings, businessmen—all these and more rub elbows at its counter."

Five years later, there was a one-page story in the *Literary Digest*:

“If you joined diner devotees at a quick ‘cup o’ java,’ you’d find, if it were daytime, that you were rubbing shoulders mostly with horny-handed men in denim. If it were before dawn, you might be rubbing shoulders with men in tails, homeward bound from a night of revelry.” (I love the fact that in 1937 there were people described as “diner devotees.”)

Just as important as the diners’ look and feel is their chow: Always affordable, it has continuously adapted to fit the public’s desires. The norm is home-style cooking, breakfast anytime, and food that is real, local and sustainable.

C. Oakley Ells in 1932 supplied his diner in Lackawanna County, Pa., with fresh eggs, milk and vegetables from his own Ells’ Sunnyside Farms, a stone’s throw down the road. In 2017, Champ’s Diner, in Woonsocket, R.I., identifies on their menu the name of the local farm that provides their eggs.

In San Diego, Ray and Herb Boggs operated the Airway Diner. Their July 1942 menu included an avocado cocktail appetizer (35 cents), a natural since San Diego County was the source of most avocados in the country. You wouldn’t find that on a diner on the East Coast at that time. The seafood of the day was grilled Catalina swordfish (85 cents), caught off nearby Santa Catalina Island.

Today the Silver Diner is a locally owned and operated chain of 14 units that set out in 1989 to create a diner for the 21st century. They have continually tweaked their offerings to serve the food that people want to eat. In 2006, Silver Diner was the first chain in the Washington, D.C., area to completely remove trans fats from their menus. Now they feature local farms that supply all-natural, antibiotic- and hormone-free meats and provide non-GMO produce in season.

I’ve studied the world of diners for more than 45 years, beginning when these classic stainless-steel eateries were believed to be a dying breed. But, to paraphrase the supposed

Mark Twain quote: “The report of their demise is premature.”

Every year there are articles and TV news magazine stories that proclaim either the death or the rebirth of the diner. I admit I once believed that diners might go extinct. One of my earliest articles was “Diners are declining, but great ones remain,” published in the *Boston Globe*, in 1974. Truth be told, more than half of the diners I profiled in that story have been demolished.

But the other half have survived. What accounts for their longevity?

In 1975, the National Trust for Historic Preservation included a session on diners and gas stations in its yearly meeting. The Christian Science Monitor noted the tension in the discussion with “Roadside architecture: is it treasure or trash?”

By the 1980s, the Henry Ford Museum, in Dearborn, Mich., was restoring Lamy’s Diner, a 1946 streamliner, built by the Worcester Lunch Car Company. This became the first of many diners to be installed as icons of our culture in museums. Also notable, vintage diners were resurrected, and new old-style diners—like the Silver Diner—began a comeback.

This was largely fueled by baby boomers seeking the comfort and nostalgia of their youth. The diner was put on a pedestal as an exemplar of what’s good about America: mom-and-pop businesses; fresh, home-style food at a good value; and an individual experience that contrasted with the cookie-cutter fast food chains.

Now, the diner is clearly safe and here to stay. With great regularity, my Facebook feed will advise me of “The 21 Best Diners in America,” according to the *Huffington Post*; “The Top 12 New England Diners,” says *Boston* magazine; “13 Picture-Perfect LA Diners You’ve Never Heard Of,” proclaims *EaterLA.com* (and of which, I might add, none is an actual

diner); and “These Are the Cutest Diners In Every State,” in the eyes of *Country Living*.

Social media keeps diners in the headlines, in our stream of consciousness, and constantly reminds us why we love these places. There’s a magical something in that word that conjures up a place where you feel at home, can have a great meal for a good price, and walk away satisfied and with a smile on your face.

The diner of the future will continue to change subtly and dramatically simultaneously: an American trait that makes it “feel the same” while ever accommodating the evolving tastes of its customers.

Richard J.S. Gutman is the foremost authority on the history and architecture of the diner. He has written three books on the subject.

Opinion: Social media makes democracy less democratic

By Rogers Brubaker

Anxieties that new communications technologies and media formats would undermine democratic citizenship go back more than a century. In the late 19th century, critics worried about sensationalistic “yellow journalism”; a cartoon from that era even used the phrase “fake news. And indeed the newly cheap mass newspapers—in reckless disregard of facts—helped push the United States into war with Spain in 1898.

A generation later, newspaperman and political commentator

Walter Lippmann observed that people “live in the same world, but they think and feel in different ones,” anticipating our current concerns about “media bubbles” by almost a century.

Yet the revolution in digital communication initially generated more enthusiasm than anxiety. Many believed that the internet would enhance rather than diminish democratic citizenship, by empowering ordinary citizens, bypassing institutional gatekeepers, enabling bottom-up mobilization and lateral communication, and making politics more transparent. It would thus foster more responsive government and enable more participatory forms of citizenship. Some forecasted that it would undermine authoritarian regimes, and indeed it was only a few years ago that commentators were celebrating the role of Twitter and Facebook in the Arab Spring.

Today the mood is much darker: The digital dream of renewing democratic citizenship has given way to a digital nightmare of undermining democratic citizenship. And not just because of Donald Trump. Trump is a symptom as much as a cause. It’s important to look beyond Trump—and beyond the discussions of fake news and Russian manipulation—to broader developments that have created a crisis of public knowledge.

The last decade has seen a transition from connectivity to hyperconnectivity. The share of the United States population over age 14 with a smartphone soared from a mere 11 percent at the end of 2008 to 75 percent at the end of 2014. The same period saw the explosive growth of social media. Regular Facebook users amounted to only 13 percent of the U.S. population at the end of 2008, but just four years later they made up more than half the population (and of course a much higher fraction among younger people). Worldwide, Facebook had 10 times as many users by the end of last year—nearly 2 billion—as it had in 2009. Twitter users increased more than sixfold in the United States from 2010 to 2014, growing from 10 million to 63 million. More Americans under 50 today regularly get news online than from television.

Hyperconnectivity is not just a technological fact; it is shaped by—and shapes in turn—economics, politics, law, and culture as well. Our current regime of connectivity is based on digital surveillance—which has rightly been described as the dominant business model of the Internet economy. The core of this business model is the extraction of massive amounts of personal data from users in exchange for nominally free services.

This intensifying and ever more sophisticated system of corporate surveillance is more comprehensive and arguably more insidious than even the most powerful systems of government surveillance. It not only enables micro-targeted (and therefore more valuable) commercial advertising. More ominously, this system of surveillance enables micro-targeted and customized political advertising. It's true that the claims of Cambridge Analytica to have decisively helped elect Donald Trump through such micro-targeting have been debunked. But increasingly sophisticated forms of data aggregation and analysis, which allow increasingly accurate inferences about individuals' traits and dispositions, have undoubtedly made possible forms of customizable micro-targeting that pose new threats to the public sphere and democratic decision-making.

The threat goes well beyond the issue of fake news. Manipulative and non-transparent micro-targeting threatens democratic decision-making regardless of whether the targeted message contains false information.

Democracy depends on public discussion and argument. If political persuasion operates behind the scenes through individualized targeting, it becomes inaccessible to public debate. The individual herself is unaware of being targeted, and since the message is invisible to others, it cannot be engaged or countered.

The threat also goes beyond targeted political advertising. Digital surveillance enables micro-targeted and customized

content of all kinds, including news stories that are specifically tailored to the recipient. Such customized news content may be presented as part of a broader, putatively non-political effort to produce and deliver personally relevant information. But even if it is not intended to persuade, customized news challenges the very idea of the publicness of news, and it builds fragmentation—and even privatization—into the basic practices of the digital ecosystem.

The intensification of digital surveillance is driven by the relentlessly commercialized competition for attention. Obviously, this is not new—getting attention has been central to mass journalism for more than a century. What's new is the way in which attention is more pervasively and precisely measured, more precisely tracked across time and context, and more precisely monetized than ever before. The ubiquitous measurement, tracking, and monetization of attention have enshrined popularity as the ultimate measure of value (and virility as the highest form of popularity).

In the media systems of Europe and North America, the commercial logic of popularity has coexisted in recent decades with a professional logic of appropriateness, newsworthiness, objectivity, and—at its best—critical inquiry. But now the logic of popularity is entirely dominant, and not only in online media. As the head of CBS, Leslie Moonves, memorably commented in early 2016, the Trump campaign "may not be good for America, but it's damn good for CBS."

Moreover, the metrics of popularity can be gamed and manipulated. Popularity can be manufactured, for example, by using bots to flood Twitter with messages and gain visibility as a "trending topic." This manipulated visibility can then become self-reinforcing if the topic is picked up—as trending Twitter topics often are—by journalists.

There is a deep affinity between the commercial logic of popularity in a hyper-connected digital ecosystem and the

cultural and political logic of populism. Populism is an ideology of immediacy or direct access. It challenges gatekeepers and mediating institutions—political parties, professional expertise, and the mainstream media—in the name of "direct access" to knowledge, direct access to culture, and direct access to political decision-making.

Digital hyperconnectivity seems to facilitate precisely such direct access. It seems to be based on disintermediation—on bypassing gatekeepers of all kinds and directly connecting everybody to everyone and everything (including all "the world's information," which Google's famous mission statement claims to make "universally accessible"). Insofar as there is an ideology of hyperconnectivity, it is precisely a populist ideology, an ideology of disintermediation.

But in fact hyperconnectivity simply replaces one mode of mediation with another. In the domain of news, it tends to replace mediation and filtering based on professional judgment with mediation and filtering based on metrics and algorithms. Who sees what—in Facebook news feeds or Google search results—is not neutral or unfiltered. Rather, who sees what is governed by complex and utterly nontransparent proprietary algorithms.

The affinity between the commercial logic of popularity and the cultural and political logic of populism has another side. The pursuit of popularity in a hyper-connected digital environment accentuates the populist style of communication that already characterized media-driven forms of political communication well before the internet age—a style characterized by dramatization, confrontation, negativity, emotionalization, personalization, visualization, and hyper-simplification.

The sheer superabundance of content that courses through the digital ecosystem also erodes democratic citizenship. Digital abundance is at once polarizing and paralyzing. There has been

much talk of Internet-based filter-bubbles and echo chambers that segregate the public into separate cognitive, emotional, and political worlds. But polarization depends on colliding worlds, not on sealed and separate worlds. It depends on mobilization against a despised, feared, or loathed "other." Digital superabundance facilitates such polarizing mobilization by assuring an inexhaustible and continuously renewed supply of discrediting representations of "the other." Breitbart News, for example, sustains a continuous stream of stories attacking liberals, leftists, multiculturalists, Muslims, the mainstream press, as well as anyone else who attacks Trump.

Abundance also can be paralyzing. Research suggests that most people are more exposed to contrary views than the theory of filter bubbles would suggest. But this does not mean that they are critically assessing alternative perspectives. The sheer profusion and hyper-availability of radically different views of the world—not just differing opinions or "alternative facts"—can overwhelm people's limited capacities for critical appraisal and paralyze their faculties of judgment and discernment. Digital superabundance, in other words, can create a "blanket of fog." Inundated in a sea of information, pseudo-information, misinformation, and disinformation, people may feel powerless to cut through the fog and assess competing claims. And declining trust in the media—as well as declining participation in the interpretive communities fostered by churches, unions, parties and other mediating institutions—may lead many people to retreat into a stance of generalized distrust.

Digital hyperconnectivity has created a media and information ecosystem that is distinctively vulnerable to the propagation of fake news in the service of profit or propaganda. But fake news is only the tip of a much larger iceberg.

The social mediatization of politics, the intensifying web of surveillance and micro-targeting, the marginalization of

institutional gatekeepers, the substitution of algorithms for professional judgment, the relentless pursuit and ubiquitous measurement of popularity, the accentuation of a populist style of communication, and the sheer superabundance of information, misinformation, and disinformation—all these developments have contributed to a crisis of public knowledge.

The institutions that generate, refine, assess, popularize, and disseminate knowledge—science, universities, and the mainstream and elite media—have suffered a massive loss in public trust and legitimacy. The digital ecosystem that incubates and circulates what purports to be knowledge is increasingly disconnected from these institutions. A mood of "epistemological populism" breeds a pervasive suspicion of expertise. Deep gaps divide the views of scientists from those of the public about subjects such as evolution, the causes of climate change, the safety of vaccines, and the safety of genetically modified foods. Robust conceptions of democratic citizenship are unthinkable without at least minimal assumptions about public knowledge and deliberative reason. But today even the most attenuated assumptions seem wholly untenable.

What can be done? First, since manifestly false news stories are just a symptom or indicator of a deeper and more systemic problem of public knowledge, strategies for addressing this problem must address this larger problem and not focus solely on fake news. Second, the problem is not simply technological but economic, political, and cultural. For this reason, we cannot simply look for technological fixes.

Third, Google, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms must be held accountable as public institutions and de facto news publishers. They cannot be allowed to hide behind the claim that they are just neutral platforms, responsible only to their users for optimizing their experience. Just what form this broader public accountability should take is a difficult and complex question. But it is

certainly not sufficient for Facebook to step up ex-post fact-checking on stories that have been flagged as problematic. That is too little, too late.

Fourth, the crisis of public knowledge makes it urgent to strengthen public broadcasting and other forms of public journalism. The commitment to public journalism has been weakening in recent decades in Europe and the United States. But now more than ever, that commitment must be renewed.

Lastly, we need to invent and invest in new forms of civic education that would seek to cultivate the new forms of literacy, numeracy, and critical intelligence that are needed for democratic citizenship in an age of digital hyperconnectivity. And we need new efforts to reclaim and rebuild a space of genuinely public discussion and debate to counter the growing fragmentation, privatization, and polarization of the digital ecosystem.

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