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Three Monstrosities of Information

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In response to the DOCAM 2020 conference theme of “monsters,” in this paper I will address three monstrosities involving information and documentation. I will do so by returning to themes discussed in three of my books: *The Modern Invention of Information, Discourse, History, and Power* (2001), *Indexing It All: The Subject in the Age of Documentation, Information, and Data* (2014), and *Documentarity: Evidence, Ontology, and Inscription* (2019). These three books form a trilogy, discussing information and information ages at three periods and scales: the first book from the beginnings of the 20th century up through today, the second book during philosophical and technological modernity, and in the third book, the theoretically and practically deployed tradition of metaphysics in “the West” for the past 2,500 years or so. I should add that the second book was written as a sort of horror story done via concepts rather than characters, so the conference theme really fits very well with the general outlook of that book and it fits the other two books, as well.

In this paper I will limit myself to outlining three general forms for the monstrosities or horrors of information: 1) the horror of information as the latest trope in the Western metaphysical tradition of what Derrida termed, “presence,” 2) the horror of information as a mode of ideational subsumption of the empirical via modern information technologies and their rationale of fulfilling individual information needs, and 3) the horror of information and its related tropes and practices as the deployment of presence across history and geography as modes of inscription and representation, and through these, management and control.

We are living through a horrifying time right now, a time that has very legitimate fears and present horrors and portends even worse horrors—the worst horrors human beings and other species as a whole have ever encountered, namely those leading to individual suffering and mass extinction. Trumpism, the COVID-19 epidemic, and climate change are, when and where I write today, daily terrors. Each of these has been, at least partially, afforded by the above monstrosities of information. These horrors can only be changed by critically engaging these monstrosities, critically engaging the history and rhetoric of information, and through this, critically engaging Western metaphysics as it appears in theory and in practice.

1.

The major theme of *The Modern Invention of Information* is that the understanding and social construction of “information,” in terms of this word

connoting metaphysical presence, is a relatively recent development, particularly during the 20th century. The book also argues that this modern sense of information also colors the historiography and sociology of information, so that each information age appears anew, erasing the history of previous ones and denying its own historical materialism. (Thus, in the 20th century, there was not only “information,” but before this, “documentation,” and still to come “data,” each term being a trope for the same sense of presence.) As Nunberg (1996) and Frohmann (2004) argued as well, the term “information” is an overly inflated term, which not only lacks an historical understanding of how it got this way but also actively erases such by its very sense of representing something given, something empirically and epistemically present in and of itself. In its modern sense, “information” as a substantive noun makes us believe that the term refers to an entity, rather than suggesting that “information” refers to various documentary types or genres or is what we say we have as the result of being informed of something. The appearance of “information” with the internet was the advent of this ideational substantive in regard to widespread digital media (“new media”), supposedly freed from paper forms of information, such as paper-based documents. As such, information supposedly challenged the cost and distribution models of paper-based documentation and the institutions that produced and collected such (e.g., traditional publishers and libraries). Electronic “information” was said to be free, or nearly so, or wanting to be so, in contrast to paper-based information. In reality, of course, internet information has increasingly become mediated by corporate entities and the ideological constraints of users and providers. The argument that “information” is immaterial and that documents are material is a red herring, based on sloppy uses of the term “immaterial” and “documents.” There are digital documents and internet information is mediated by providers, user needs, algorithms, and search engines.

“Presence” is the term that Jacques Derrida used to describe the Western metaphysical tradition’s manner of understanding being. A metaphysics of presence assumes that the essence of being is transcendental to time and space, and it is self-identical or “auto-affective” in its construction (Gasché, 1986).

We should understand that presence is also the form of knowledge for the metaphysical tradition (through philosophical modernism for both rationalism—Descartes’ notion of “clear and distinct” knowledge—and Lockean empiricism’s simple ideas, up through logical positivism’s notions of statements). In Plato’s works, every entity is seen as having an essence that is changeless in its form or idea (*eidos*) and truth is the correspondence of knowledge to this.

Correspondence theory runs through European medieval philosophy and its doctrine of *adaequatio rei et intellectus*, and up through twentieth century positivism's picture theory, and in documentation and information science it is clearly seen in Otlet's notion of "facts" (see Frohmann, 2007), bibliography, and "the Book," and these knowledge claims echo in the internet's small "chunk" rhetorical forms of webpages and memes. (In English and many other European languages, the term "fact" has both an ontological and an epistemic sense, and these are often used ambiguously with one another and as a grammatical support for the above epistemologies—for example, in the perfectly understandable, but logically ambiguous, English language sentence: "the facts of the world are given in the facts that the book presents [i.e., represents about them].") From a positivist perspective, science is made up of statements—truths—that picture the world, a world which itself can be viewed as distinct entities and events. Truth is made up of the epistemic re-presentation of what is, as present, the correspondence of the essence of things and intellect.

The great, and still ongoing, historical transition between medieval semiotically formed knowledge (where correspondence is governed by coherence theories of truth) and modern experimental knowledge involves struggles between the power and methods of representation and those of entities themselves in forming presence, that is, in making the appearance of what is evident into evidence. Today's informational representations taken as knowledge often return us to the medieval realm where narrative or visual representational coherence is seen as grounds for truth. This has resulted in a great political tragedy, where belief has replaced hard-won knowledge and knowledge institutions built during modernity. Today, "information" is often the literal or metaphorical *image* of knowledge and its truths or potential truths. This is to say, that knowledge and its truths or potential truths are *representational*, or simply, based in the *imagination* (—whether they will result in genuine knowledge or not is a more complex question).

The Modern Invention of Information attempted to reassert the material (including rhetorical) and historical production of the concept of information, of informational forms and the concept of the information age, against their erasure by information age rhetoric throughout the 20th century. The erasure of the production of information led to inflated claims about new information and communication technologies, and it led to information age rhetoric and commercial institutions that put on the defensive older knowledge institutions, such as libraries, government science and research institutions, universities, and so on.

We should recall that a similar displacement of older knowledge institutions by new information and communication technologies (e.g., cinema, radio, and nascent television, along with the expanded sphere of newspaper production—i.e., “alternative news”—) happened in Nazi Germany in the 1930s, but in the 1990s and throughout the early 21st century no one was making the connection between this earlier event and the information revolution. Instead, neoliberal technological deterministic discourses celebrated “the information highway” and digital corporate “innovation,” and on the other hand, libertarian and political Left discourses in different manners from one another equally celebrated information “freedom” and new emerging singularities supposedly rising out of new possibilities of expression through these new technologies. Technological utopianism was everywhere. No one really saw the resurrection of fascist tendencies and their empowerment by these newer technologies, even when they did recognize the developing remediation of the internet by old media at the end of the last century and the beginning of this century.

The horror of information in *The Modern Invention of Information* is the horror of the trope of information as a form of presence and representation that erases its historical, epistemic, and material construction in the real world. The attempt of this book as a critical work was to reassert the materiality of information through historical critique.

Today, the monstrosity of the modern invention of information and its technological and socio-cultural deployment can be seen most dominantly in fake news and other such phenomena, where the term “information” covers all sorts of rhetorical genres of texts, documents, images, conversational fragments, fiction, non-fiction and everything in between—anything found through digital means, and all being treated as having truth values or possible truth values worthy of our attention, and each judged the same way as one another. However, behind the allure and addiction of the screen and digital social connection in an otherwise divided, lonely, and consumerist society, lies rhetorical, ideological, and algorithmic mechanisms that mediate the “user,” with only a small subset of “information” resources belonging to processes of knowledge institutions and knowledge processes. Knowledge is only a small subset of what is available on the internet, only a small subset of “information,” with the majority of documentary and social media texts and linkages serving likes or dislikes, that is, taste. The seeking of information on the internet is largely driven by taste and by beliefs, not by knowledge (though the taste for knowledge may well be a driving factor). The

proliferation of the belief that the internet has given us “facts” (as the product of knowledge institutions and knowledge processes) is largely untrue.

2.

The theme of *Indexing it All* is the horror of Hegelian dialectical subsumption, which is the horror of the uncritical or narcissistic dialectical seeking and gathering of beings and events for the purpose of the subject’s self-realization through them. It is a horror because such an event is never started or completed by the subject him or herself, but by the cultural forms and social norms that make up the subject as a product of deeper grammatological forms and psychological and socio-political development, and so this drive of subsumption (in information science, of the seeking, hunting, and gathering of information) is, literally, ideologically informed without realizing it. The horror is not only the informational appropriation of entities, but that the critical difference above is not revealed, but instead, erased with modern information (as was suggested in *The Modern Invention of Information*).

In *Indexing it All*, the dialectic is shown through the subject’s solicitude and positioning toward documents and proto-documents (that is, in terms of what is evidence and is evident) as opposite the subject, as objects of use for the subject (or “user”). But *Indexing it All* shows that the subject’s needs and uses are actually formed by documents and their collections, and both user needs and documentary contents are inscribed in constellations of cultural forms and tendencies toward their deployment in social norms—that is, they are inscribed in rationalities of ideas (i.e., ideologies). As any reference librarian knows, user needs, and so, the subject as a subject-of-(information)-needs, can only be expressed through the collections of documents and the metadata available to them, and these collections themselves reflect constellations of ideas in society and selected and made available through publishers. The same principle resides with the internet, though on a much greater and less scholarly scale.

Indexing it All examines the modern conception of information in terms of information seeking and retrieval, as a system of dialectically formed “information” relations within three different modern sciences: documentation, information science, and data science. The dialectical logic common to each of these is users as subjects (of information needs) and documents as objects of that need. The traditional account of this relationship in modern library science and information science of the past hundred and fifty years or so is that users have

information needs and information systems fulfill those needs with documents, accessed through their metadata or other means of representing, indexing, and organizing documents according to their documentary “subject” contents, that is to say, their “aboutness.” However, to repeat: this book argues that it is the information systems that define the nature of the subject’s information needs (and that of the psychological subject—the so-called “user”) through collections of documents and their representation through subject headings or other metadata and the indexing and algorithms that bring (co-index or co-position) the subjects and objects together, and that these are all inscribed by common constellations and grammars of cultural forms and social norms.

As Michael Buckland has written, information indexes are backward facing in time (2012). Buckland’s insight is very important. The critical user of an information system realizes that instead of looking into the future, she, like Walter Benjamin’s angel of history, is being blown into the future while looking at the past, with heaps of language piling up at her feet. Information systems index documents, which are made up of collected cultural forms and social norms from the past, and these then help shape the future in a literate society. In a literate society—particularly, as today, one so heavily and daily mediated by not only past records but the recirculation and persistence of past records—Buckland’s observation is especially insightful and important. As mediated by information systems, our expressions follow the logic (literally, through mediated taxonomies, programming, and graph algorithms) of past linguistic and social grammars. We like to think of our lives today as being very immediate, but our immediate attention is heavily indexed to, and so mediated by, past textual and documentary forms. And such literacy is not always beneficial for relationships toward each other and the world. (“Read” the ALA posters say—but we read now more than ever and many of us are not very knowledgeable.)

So, the monstrosity of the modern episteme of information is that ideology guides the subject into their subjectivity as an “information seeker” or “user” via systems of signs and their norms for use, while at the same time the subject sees him or herself (and is seen as such within information seeking and user studies) as an agent of free will and choice. This belief in the free will or “rational choice” of the user ignores, however, that the information “user” is used by information and communication systems, which serve a sociotechnical political economy of “needs” as shaped by that economy, e.g., based in immediate and attention-based time biases and human and natural exploitation. Current information systems do serve needs: first of all, the needs of current political, cultural, social, and above

all, financial economies, and then the psychological needs of users as shaped within these. We should rethink our relationship to, particularly, “commercial providers” and their algorithms if we desire life values and futures other than what we have.

I will add that when *Indexing it All* was published in 2014 the internet was still largely being seen in digital studies and cultural theory as a distinct and final break from twentieth century mass media, mass psychology, and fascist politics, a site of “emergent” singularities rather than representational subjects mediated and manufactured by old politics and media systems. After this book was published, I thought that I had perhaps overstated the case for ideological positioning via information and information technologies, that I was too pessimistic. But then Donald Trump was elected president, not simply through old media, but very much aided through remediated new media. Masses of people had voted for a figure of old prejudices and hate and a politics of mystified and falsified beliefs—in sum, a fascist politician—at the very height of the “information revolution”! Trump is a figure of the old media who circulates on the new media with even more power than when he was a TV personality. (Italians had earlier seen something like this with Berlusconi in Italy, though before the more robust rollout of the internet and social media.) The racist and nationalist father had returned with all its prejudices and viciousness in order to color experience and to return experience to the user in terms of that coloration. This figure and its social and cultural figurations historically returned, with even more power than previously, not despite, but thanks to the internet, or at least the internet once it had been remediated by not only the corporations, but the logic, of old media—that is, the logic of culturally and socially positioning needs within normative collections of choices. The past was and is not dead, but lying and indexed there, waiting to be reawakened more fully. In evidentiary or pseudo-evidentiary information systems, which are based on the past, and with the heavily information mediated subject driven by the past’s political unconscious, the possibility of this reawakening is not just virtual, but real.

Indexing it All was written as a sort of horror novel composed of concepts, depicting the Hegelian dialectic of Right as it occupies and organizes individuals and society through documentation, information, and data systems and their “sciences” (—that is, science largely understood as engineering projects, which in the case of information, is not just technological, but social and cultural engineering).

I was rather horrified at what my book suggested. I also felt, however, that the horror was much, much deeper—historically, socially, and geographically than modern information and its technologies and sciences. So, I wanted to write about the much deeper and broader horror and technologies behind modern indexing—the social and cultural positioning and co-positioning—of persons and documents by ideologies and prejudices. And so, my next book, *Documentarity*, evolved, out of a fascination with the question of the figuration of being and truth in terms of what becomes evident and how it is afforded or allowed that evidence by different genres of inscription and expression, particularly in regard to practices (and limits) of representation.

3.

Documentarity: Evidence, Ontology, and Inscription (2019) was an attempt to extend my earlier readings of information as a kind of figuration across literatures, genres, methods, and history. The book examines the emergence of what is (what becomes evident and present) and how it is taken as what is (how it is represented as evidence). The book tries to account for powerful particulars in their singularity and their capture and mediation by *a priori* and *a posteriori* systems of representational evidence. The appearance of something as evident, and then something taken as evidential, in the mode of information, is read in terms of the various inscriptional techne for such, from ancient philosophy through contemporary computation.

Recalling Erich Auerbach's famous book *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, *Documentarity* overviews the relation between powerful particulars and Western genres of representation in the domain of inscriptionality or "literature" writ large, a domain which has recently become understood as "information." The book asks, "what is information and informational?" in various genres and practices, from what's seen today as the humanities through the social sciences and computational engineering. Throughout the book, the problem of Suzanne Briet's antelope (an inquiry that runs throughout these three books) remains in the background: namely, the status of the antelope before, during, and after its capture and its transformation into being a zoological type by documentary institutions. This story, which begins Briet's 1951 book, *Qu'est-ce que la documentation?* (Briet, 1951), exemplifies the expansion of Western science as "progress" following the Second World War, which she sees being led by documentation as a "cultural technique." (Curiously, Bruno Latour's very different account of documentary processes and information, which, however,

uses a similar account of colonial zoological capture, similarly passes over the colonial and anthropomorphic intonations of its example (1987, 1996).)

In *Documentarity*, Briet's story of the antelope is emblematic of the seeking, appropriation, and use of entities as "information," and this suggests the problem of the modes or genres of inscriptionality of things as evidence for something other than their particular selves (for example, their type identities within natural or social science classifications or everyday social ontologies).

These types of appropriative inscriptions underlie the mechanisms of colonial and postcolonial management in Western culture and then worldwide in modernity and are the foundations for the Anthropocene and its continuation. They are the basis for our system of reproduction as a system of industrial production, following a teleological causal model that utilizes short-sighted human and natural resource appropriation and exploitation. Nietzsche through Heidegger discussed these inscriptionalities as occurring not only through material and technological, but through social, cultural, and moral devices. For Nietzsche these are mechanisms or devices of the will to power, or for Heidegger, the mode of appropriative solicitude toward others understood as objects, known through the psychological disposition of "the will." Within the disposition of the will, other people and entities, and the world itself, are seen as means toward the will's ends, and so they are re-presented to the will as elements of worlds understood as external to the self. This is that, and as that it can be used or not used for what the will wants and wills toward.

A concern with the history of epistemic capture and control, of documentation and of information, of colonialism and anthropocentrism, of *appropriation through and as information*, has occupied my work since I first started studying information as a graduate student at the University of California at Berkeley. It is the problem of presence as a function of representation and its means for control through communication, information, and media technologies. These devices of recording and record keeping, of which the ideational categories of Platonic forms are the exemplary epistemic device for the metaphysical tradition, are products of not only writing, but writing as a more permanent or "fixed" (i.e., documentary) form, and earlier, in oral traditions, of mnemonics. These are devices for the will, that is, devices for the appropriation of others according to the representational imagination as a means of fixity and control.

If the Anthropocene is to be reversed, it will require a life philosophy that breaks free from these habits, that brackets these technologies; it will require modes of everyday human being that see beyond the will's imagination. It will require a value of time fundamentally at odds with our current life and modernity. We require a philosophy of life that both starts and ends with community or being-with (*Mitsein*), stretching across the entire animal sphere with this notion, and we need as our core value a sense of reproduction that is responsible for future generations far ahead of us. And this strikes directly into the problem of not just the ego, not just industrial technology, but into the long historical culture of information, into the history of the inscription and recording of beings. Etymologically, to "record" is to repeat what is at heart. The horror recounted in *Documentarity* is that the heart can be stopped and removed in order to be preserved, and be preserved in order to control those whose heart continues to beat. With "information," whether in older or newer documentary systems, there remains the problem of the relation of being to beings. The relation of information to the living and the dead, and more importantly to those still to come, lies at the heart of the problem of information today.

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