9   The Daylight

> When men yield up the privilege of thinking, the last shadow of liberty
> quits the horizon.
>
> Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*

The third, and most profound, level of attention is the "daylight." By
this I mean the suite of foundational capacities that enable us to
define our goals and values in the first place, to "want what we want
to want." When our daylight is compromised, *epistemic* distraction
results. Epistemic distraction is the diminishment of underlying cap-
acities that enable a person to define or pursue their goals: capacities
essential for democracy such as reflection, memory, prediction, leis-
ure, reasoning, and goal-setting. This is where the distractions of the
attention economy most directly undermine the foundations of
democracy.

Epistemic distraction can make it harder to "integrate associ-
ations across many different experiences to detect common structures
across them." These commonalities "form abstractions, general prin-
ciples, concepts, and symbolisms that are the medium of the sophis-
ticated, 'big-picture' thought needed for truly long-term goals."[1] In the
absence of this capacity to effectively plan one's own projects and
goals, our automatic, bottom-up processes take over. Thus, at its
extreme, epistemic distraction produces what Harry Frankfurt refers
to as "wantonness" because it removes reflected-upon, intentional
reasons for action, leaving only impulsive reasons in its wake.[2]

I call this type of distraction "epistemic" for two reasons. First,
it distracts from knowledge of the world (both outer and inner) that's
necessary for someone to be able to function as a purposeful, compe-
tent agent. Second, it constitutes what the philosopher Miranda
Fricker calls an "epistemic injustice," in that it harms a person in

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their ability to be a "knower" (in this case, a knower of both the world and of oneself).[3] Like existential distraction, epistemic distraction also has an impact on both autonomy and dignity. It violates the integrity of the self by undermining the necessary preconditions for it to exist and to thrive, thus pulling the carpet out from under one's feet, so to speak.

Our daylight may be obscured when our capacities for knowing what's true, or for predicting what's likely to be true, are undermined. The undermining of truth can happen via the phenomenon of "fake news," which Collins Dictionary selected as its 2017 Word of the Year, defining it as "false, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting."[4] An Oxford University study found that during the 2016 US election, Twitter users posted more "misinformation, polarizing and conspiratorial content" than real news articles.[5] The Pope has gone so far as to call fake news a "grave sin that hurts the heart of the journalist and hurts others."[6] Our capacities for prediction may also be undermined by the attention economy, for instance when the practice of statistical opinion polling itself becomes subjugated to its incentives. Especially during major elections, it now seems that small, meaningless day-to-day changes in candidates' probabilities of winning serve as the "rewards" drawing readers back to websites whose ultimate aim is to garner page views and clicks. (When this effect occurs by design, perhaps we could call it "statbait," or statistical clickbait.)

Our daylight can also be obscured via the diminishment of intelligence or other cognitive capacities. A Hewlett-Packard study found that distractions decreased the IQ scores of knowledge workers by 10 points, which the researchers note is "twice the decline recorded for those smoking marijuana."[7] Similarly, researchers at the University of Texas found that the mere presence of one's smartphone can adversely affect available working memory capacity and functional fluid intelligence.[8] Also of relevance here are physiological effects, such as the stress produced by "email apnea," a phenomenon that occurs when a person opens their email inbox to find many

unread messages, inducing a "fight-or-flight" response that causes the person to stop breathing.[9] In addition, recent research has also associated social media usage with increased social anxiety, depression, and lower mood.[10] Another source of anxiety is the phenomenon of "cyberchondria," which is defined as the "unfounded escalation of concerns about common symptomatology, based on the review of search results and literature on the Web." A 2009 study found that escalatory terminology on the pages users visit – which serves, as do clickbait headlines, to increase page views and other engagement metrics – plays a key role in this process.[11]

Reflection is an essential ingredient for the kind of thinking that helps us determine "what we want to want." For the American philosopher Christine Korsgaard, reflection is the way we "turn our attention on to our own mental activities" in order to "call our beliefs and motives into question."[12] When the technologies of our attention inhibit our capacities for reflection, our "daylight" gets obscured in ways that have particular implications for politics. For instance, notifications or addictive mobile apps may fill up those little moments in the day during which a person might have otherwise reflected on their goals and priorities. Users check their phones an average of 150 times per day[13] (and *touch* them over 2,600 times per day),[14] so that would add up to a lot of potential reflection going unrealized.

Closely related to the task of reflection is the activity of leisure. We often conflate leisure with entertainment. However, properly understood, leisure is akin to what Aristotle called "periodic non-thought".[15] It's that unstructured downtime that serves as the ground out of which one's true self bubbles forth. This sort of unstructured thought is of particular developmental importance for children.[16] The philosopher Josef Pieper even argued in 1948 that leisure is "the basis of culture," the unconscious ground out of which not only individual but also collective values and meaning-making processes emerge.[17]

Leisure also uniquely enables the kind of thinking and deliberation necessary for the thoughtful invention of societal institutions.

The philosopher Hannah Arendt saw this as being particularly true when it comes to the design of democratic systems worth having.[18] In an unpublished lecture, she writes about the authors of the United States' institutions of government:

> No doubt, it is obvious and of great consequence that this passion for freedom for its own sake awoke in and was nourished by men of leisure, by the *hommes de lettres* who had no masters and were not always busy making a living. In other words, they enjoyed the privileges of Athenian and Roman citizens without taking part in those affairs of state that so occupied the freemen of antiquity. Needless to add, where men live in truly miserable conditions this passion for freedom is unknown.[19]

"Leisure" here for Arendt seems to mean more than just "non-thought" or reflection: in counterposing it with work, she seems to be using the term to refer to something like a respite from having to perform attentional labor. A line from Theodore Roethke's 1963 poem "Infirmity" comes to mind: "A mind too active is no mind at all / The deep eye sees the shimmer on the stone . . ." The busy demands of making a living can make a mind too active, but so can the busy demands of notifications, never-ending feeds of information, persuasive appeals, endless entertainment options, and all the other pings on our attention that the digital attention economy throws our way. This seems to suggest that there's an opportunity to clarify where and how our interactions with the forces of the attention economy could be considered a kind of attentional labor, and what the implications of that characterization might be for the kinds of freedom we look to leisure to sustain.

However, the most visible and consequential form of compromised "daylight" we see in the digital attention economy today is the prevalence and centrality of moral outrage. Moral outrage consists of more than just anger: it also includes the impulse to judge, punish, and shame someone you think has crossed a moral line. You're most

likely to experience moral outrage when you feel not merely *angry* about some perceived misdeed, but angry and *disgusted*.[20]

Moral outrage played a useful role earlier in human evolution, when people lived in small nomadic groups: it enabled greater accountability, cooperation, and in-group trust.[21] However, the amplification of moral outrage on a societal, or even global, scale carries dire implications for the pursuit of politics worth having. In the past, when we lived in environments of information scarcity, all the world's moral transgressions weren't competing for our attention every day. According to a study in the US and Canada, less than 5 percent of the population will ever personally experience a truly moral misdeed in real life.[22] However, in the era of smartphones, if *anyone* experiences a misdeed, then *everyone* potentially experiences it.

On an almost daily basis now, it seems the entire internet – that is to say, *we* – erupt in outrage at some perceived moral transgression whose news has cascaded across the web, or gone "viral." Virality, the mass transmission of some piece of information across a network, is biased toward certain types of information over others. Since the 1960s, it's been widely held that bad news spreads more quickly and easily than good news.[23] More recent research building upon this idea has shown that it's not only the emotional "valence" of the information – namely, how good or bad it makes you feel – that influences whether or not you'll share it, but also the degree to which the particular emotion you experience produces an "arousal response" in you, namely makes you more physiologically alert and attentive.[24] In other words, if you've got two equally "bad" pieces of news to share with your friends, one of which makes you feel sad and the other angry – but you only want to share one of them – then odds are you'll share the one that angers you, because anger's a high-arousal emotion whereas sadness is low-arousal.

Here's just one example of the kind of webwide outrage cascade I'm talking about. In July of 2015 a dentist from the US state of Minnesota went hunting in Zimbabwe and killed a well-known lion

named Cecil. Cecil's cause of death was an arrow followed by – after about forty hours of stumbling around, bleeding, in the wilderness – a rifle round. Cecil was then decapitated and flown to Minnesota as the trophy of a victorious hunt. It cost around $50,000 to kill Cecil. It may not have been legal.

When the story of Cecil's demise went "viral," the whole internet seemed to roar in outrage all at once. On Twitter, Cecil's memorial hashtag, #CecilTheLion, received 670,000 tweets in just twenty-four hours.[25] Comedian Jimmy Kimmel called the Minnesotan dentist "the most hated man in America who never advertised Jell-O on television." Actress Mia Farrow tweeted the dentist's address.[26] Crowds appeared at his office to yell "Murderer! Terrorist!" through megaphones and to display homemade signs suggesting that he "ROT IN HELL." Someone spray-painted "Lion Killer" on his house. Someone else took down his professional website. Still others, sitting elsewhere in the world, spent hours falsifying one-star Yelp reviews of his dental practice. On Facebook, the thousand-plus member group that emerged as the de facto mission control for Cecil's revenge brigade was called "Shame Lion Killer Dr. Walter Palmer and River Bluff Dental."[27]

When children behave like this toward one another, we use words like "cyberbullying" or "harassment." Yet when it's adults doing the shaming and threatening, we're inclined to shrug our shoulders, or even cheer it as "karma," "sweet, sweet revenge," or "justice in the court of public opinion." But it isn't any of those things. It's nothing more – and nothing less – than mob rule, a digital Salem. And today, because the targets of moral outrage can no longer be burned at the stake (in most places), the implicit goal becomes to destroy them symbolically, reputationally – we might even say *attentionally* – for their transgression.

Yet don't some transgressions *deserve* anger, and even outrage? Certainly. As the famous bumper sticker says: "if you're not outraged, you're not paying attention." Sometimes, the social pressure that comes from moral outrage is the only means we have to hold people

accountable for their actions, especially when the institutions of society have failed to do so. For example, in 2011 moral outrage in Egypt led to the ouster of Hosni Mubarak from the presidency and advanced the Arab Spring.[28] In 2012 in the United States, after the shooting of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed African American teenager, moral outrage galvanized national conversations about race, guns, and accountability in law enforcement.[29] And in 2017, moral outrage finally gave a hearing to many women whose claims about the sexual offenses of Harvey Weinstein, widely considered the most powerful man in Hollywood, had previously been ignored if not outright disbelieved. Upon Weinstein's exile from the entertainment industry, similar claims came to light about other figures in Hollywood and beyond, ultimately leading to widespread societal reflection about issues of sexual harassment, gender relations, and power dynamics in the workplace.[30]

But if justice is our goal – as it should be – then it is not at all clear that these dynamics of moral outrage and mob rule advance it. If anything, they seem to lead in the opposite direction.

In her book *Anger and Forgiveness*, Martha Nussbaum describes the ways in which anger is morally problematic. She uses Aristotle's definition of anger, which is pretty close to the concept of moral outrage I gave above: it's "a desire accompanied by pain for an imagined retribution on account of an imagined slighting inflicted by people who have no legitimate reason to slight oneself or one's own." The "imagined slighting" and "imagined retribution," Nussbaum says, essentially take the form of status downrankings. She argues that much moralistic behavior, therefore, aims not at *justice*-oriented but *status*-oriented outcomes. For example, virtue signaling often masquerades as apparently useful or prudent actions, as when people take action to ensure that sex offenders don't move to their neighborhood. The real goal here, says Nussbaum, is one of "lowering the status of sex offenders and raising the status of good people like herself."

There is, however, one particular type of anger that Nussbaum views as valuable: what she calls "transition anger." This refers to anger

that is followed by "the Transition," or the "healthy segue into forward-looking thoughts of welfare, and, accordingly, from anger into compassionate hope." "In a sane and not excessively anxious and status-focused person," she writes, "anger's idea of retribution or payback is a brief dream or cloud, soon dispelled by saner thoughts of personal and social welfare." However, in the attention economy, outrage cascades in such a way that the "Transition" rarely, if ever, has any chance to occur. What results, then, is unbridled mobocracy, or mob rule.

One might object here and say that "mob justice" is better than no justice at all. Nussbaum would seem to disagree: "when there is great injustice," she says, "we should not use that fact as an excuse for childish and undisciplined behavior." And while "accountability expresses society's commitment to important values," it "does not require the magical thinking of payback." In other words, recognizing that killing Cecil the Lion was the wrong thing to do, and holding those involved accountable, in no way requires – or justifies – the status-downranking behaviors of shaming or trying to destroy their reputations and livelihoods.

In 1838 a young Abraham Lincoln gave a speech at the Lyceum in Springfield, Illinois in which he warned about the threat that outrage and the mobocratic impulses it engenders pose for democracy and justice:

> [T]here is, even now, something of ill-omen, amongst us. I mean the increasing disregard for law which pervades the country; the growing disposition to substitute the wild and furious passions, in lieu of the sober judgment of Courts; and the worse than savage mobs, for the executive ministers of justice ... Thus, then, by the operation of this mobocratic spirit, which all must admit, is now abroad in the land, the strongest bulwark of any Government, and particularly of those constituted like ours, may effectually be broken down and destroyed.[31]

He continued: "There is no grievance that is a fit object of redress by mob law." Mobocratic "justice" is no justice worth having, and this is

only partly because of the outcomes it tends to produce. It's also because of the *way* mobocracy goes about producing them.

Legal professionals have a saying: "Justice is the process, not the outcome."[32] The process of mobocratic "justice" fueled by viral outrage that cascades online is one of caprice, arbitrariness, and uncertainty. So it should come as no surprise that mob rule is precisely the path that Socrates, in *The Republic*, describes as being the path societies take from democracy back into tyranny.[33]

Unfortunately, mob rule is hard-coded into the design of the attention economy. In this way, it can be considered a kind of society-wide utility function that optimizes for extremism, which may at times even manifest as terrorism. It creates an environment in which extremist actors, causes, or groups who feed on outrage can flourish. As the writer Tobias Rose-Stockwell has put it, "this is the uncomfortable truth of terrorism's prominence in our lives: We have built an instant distribution system for its actual intent – *Terror*."[34]

On an individual level, the proliferation of outrage creates more fear and anxiety in our lives. A headline of an article on the satirical news site The Onion reads, "Blogger Takes Few Moments Every Morning To Decide Whether To Feel Outraged, Incensed, Or Shocked By Day's News."[35] It also contributes to the "stickiness," or the compulsive effects of the medium, that keep us "hooked" and continually coming back for more. It can also skew our view of the world by giving us the impression that things are much worse than they actually are. In his essay *A Free Man's Worship*, Bertrand Russell writes, "indignation is still a bondage, for it compels our thoughts to be occupied with an evil world; and in the fierceness of desire from which rebellion springs there is a kind of self-assertion which it is necessary for the wise to overcome."[36] Or, as a worker in a Russian "troll house" put it, "if every day you are feeding on hate, it eats away at your soul."[37]

When the attention economy amplifies moral outrage in a way that moralizes political division, it clears the way for the tribalistic

impulse to claim for one's own group the mantle of representing the "real" or "true" will of the people as a whole. This, for Jan-Werner Müller in *What is Populism?*, is the essence of the concept of "populism."[38]

In recent years we've witnessed a flood of political events across Western liberal democracies that have been described as "populist" in character. Yet the term's definition has remained stubbornly mercurial. Some have used it to refer to particularly emotive styles of collective action. Some have used it to mean antielitism, others antipluralism. And some simply use it to describe a type of politics that seems vaguely problematic. Our conceptions of populism have themselves been polarized.

Müller offers a helpful corrective. In his book, he writes that populism is "a particular *moralistic imagination of politics*, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and fully unified ... people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior." He says that "populism is about making a certain kind of moral claim," namely that "only some of the people are really the people." In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau warned of the risk that "particular wills could replace the general will in the deliberations of the people." Müller's conception of populism can thus be seen as a kind of moralized version of that fragmentation of collective identity. But while the development of Rousseau's general will "requires actual participation by citizens; the populist, on the other hand, can divine the proper will of the people on the basis of what it means, for instance, to be a 'real American.'"

The work of Berkeley cognitive linguist George Lakoff is extremely relevant here. For several years he has been calling attention to the way in which American politics may be read as the projection of family systems dynamics onto the body politic: in this reading, the right is the "strict father" whereas the left is the "nurturing mother."[39] (It is relevant here to note that in 2004, one of the highest-correlated views with voting Republican was support for corporal punishment, or "spanking" one's children.)[40] Lakoff explains,

"the basic idea is that authority is justified by morality, and that, in a well-ordered world, there should be a moral hierarchy in which those who have traditionally dominated should dominate." He continues, "The hierarchy is God above man; man above nature; the rich above the poor; employers above employees; adults above children; Western culture above other cultures; our country above other countries. The hierarchy also extends to men above women, whites above non-whites, Christians above non-Christians, straights above gays." "Since this is seen as a 'natural' order," he continues, "it is not to be questioned."[41]

It's easy to spot examples of populism, on this particular definition, across the political spectrum in recent years. On the right, it manifests as appeals to rural American voters as being "real Americans," "birtherism," or Nigel Farage's hailing of the UK's "Brexit" vote as a "victory for real people." On the left, it manifests as appeals to "the 99%" (i.e. we are "the people," if you round up), as well as in various manifestations of identity politics.

Müller writes that populists "can accurately be described as 'enemies of institutions' – although not of institutions in general" – only "mechanisms of representation that fail to vindicate their claim to exclusive moral representation." In this light, calls on the American left in the wake of the 2016 US presidential election to abolish the electoral college system (in which Hillary Clinton lost the electoral vote but won the popular vote) may be read as similarly "impulsive" desires to get rid of intermediary regulatory systems. "Everything that liberals from Montesquieu and Tocqueville onward once lauded as moderating influences – what they called intermediate institutions – disappears here in favor of Urbinati's 'direct representation.'"

Importantly, Müller also writes that political crises don't cause populism: "a crisis – whether economic, social, or ultimately also political – does not automatically produce populism" of this sort. Nor can populism merely be chalked up to "frustration," "anger," or "resentment" – to take such a view would not only be uncharitable

but indeed also patronizing, and even a dereliction of one's duties as a citizen. As Müller writes, "simply to shift the discussion to social psychology (and treat the angry and frustrated as potential patients for a political sanatorium) is to neglect a basic democratic duty to engage in reasoning."

Yet the technologies of the digital attention economy don't promote or select for the kind of reasoning, deliberation, or understanding that's necessary to take political action beyond the white-hot flash of outrage and revolution. As Wael Ghonim, the Egyptian activist who set up the Facebook group that was instrumental in sparking the Arab Spring, said in a talk called "The Algorithms of Fear":

> We who use the Internet now "like" or we flame – but there's [very little] now happening [algorithmically] to drive people into the more consensus-based, productive discussions we need to have, to help us make civic progress. Productive discussions aren't getting the [media] distribution they deserve. We're not driving people to content that could help us, as a society . . . come together without a flame war . . . You can build algorithms and experiences that are designed to get the best out of people, and you can build algorithms and experiences that drive out the worst. It's our job as civic technologists to build experiences that drive the best. We can do that. We must do that now.[42]

What's the best part of people that our technologies should be designed to bring out? What should the system be inducing in us instead of outrage? Nussbaum writes, "the spirit that should be our goal has many names: Greek *philophrosunē*, Roman *humanitas*, biblical *agapē*, African *ubuntu* – a patient and forbearing disposition to see and seek the good rather than to harp obsessively on the bad."

The problem, of course, is that the "patient and forbearing disposition to see and seek the good" does not grab eyeballs, and therefore does not sell ads. "Harping obsessively on the bad,"

however, does. As it stands, the dynamics of the attention economy are thus structurally set up to undermine the most noble aims and virtues worth pursuing. Again, outrage and anger are not bad – they are understandable human responses to injustice, and they can even make us feel happy, in a way.[43] However, because the attention economy contains many incentives to induce anger but none to induce the "Transition," outrage rapidly cascades into mobocracy on a societal, if not global, scale.

By compromising the "daylight" of our attention, then, the digital attention economy directly militates against the foundations of democracy and justice. It undermines fundamental capacities that are preconditions for self-determination at both the individual and the collective level. In fact, to the extent that we take these fundamental capacities to be among our uniquely human guiding lights, there's a very real sense in which epistemic distraction *literally* dehumanizes.

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