

INFO 200 Book Review: But What If We're Wrong?

📅 September 22, 2019 (<https://ischoolblogs.sjsu.edu/info/musick/2019/09/22/info-200-book-review-but-what-if-were-wrong/>)

👤 Dani Musick (<https://ischoolblogs.sjsu.edu/info/musick/author/djmusick/>)



Image: But What If We're Wrong? book cover (Goodreads)

Chuck Klosterman's (<http://chuckklostermanauthor.com/>) (2016) book, *But What If We're Wrong?* (<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/27068734-but-what-if-we-re-wrong-thinking-about-the-present-as-if-it-were-the-pa>), explores the nature of information. He considers several facets of pop culture and science and reframes them as if he were studying our society from the distant future. However, he starts from the premise that there is no way to know what future society will value or what standards they will use to examine and judge our era. This leaves us wondering—what if our understanding of the world is wrong?—with no way to confirm either way. Despite this being a philosophical exercise, he conveys a sense of gravity about the question as he attempts to break down the hubris that makes us think our current understanding is as accurate as it will ever be.

Klosterman considers pop culture like books and music as well as weightier issues dealing with politics and our understanding of the universe. He draws comparisons to the distant past (Aristotle's theories were widely believed for centuries until someone realized he was wrong) and conjectures about the distant future (some contemporary cultural pillars like television and sports will evolve beyond recognition, if they exist at all)—all to support his claim that we are most likely wrong about

what we consider important, how we value information, and how we understand our world right now.

The way we study history, for example, has already changed: it used to be a field of the humanities, but now it is increasingly treated as a social science (Klosterman, 2016, p. 202). Dan Carlin (<https://www.dancarlin.com/>) notes that “historians are much more diligent about facts than they used to be....but the downside is—when you're talking about stories that involve human beings—there's a lot of it that's just not quantifiable” (as cited in Klosterman, 2016, p. 202). Carlin argues that the narrative behind the facts, while perhaps not as technically accurate, is important for understanding the whole picture. He uses this perspective to empathize with the past rather than dissociate it from the present.

Klosterman conjectures that future historians will exclusively use scientific methods with no interpretation to study our present day; as raw, unbiased information, facts should be the best representation of history, right? But this is at odds with some current understandings of information: facts cannot always account for the human experience. Cornelius defines information as “properly seen not as an objective independent entity as part of a ‘real world,’ but [as] a human artefact, constructed and reconstructed within social situations” (as cited in Bates, 2009, p. 2353). Separating information from its context reduces its value. There is, of course, value in studying the statistics of a historical era, but without the qualitative data to help frame those hard facts, the information is incomplete.

As a complex window into the human experience, the internet manages to build a bridge between the (recent) past and the present: “[It creates] a perpetual sense of *now*. It's a continual merging of the past with the present....There is no longer any distance between what we used to think and what we currently think” (Klosterman, 2016, p. 232). The internet allows all ideas to exist simultaneously, for better or for worse. H. G. Wells (1937) thought this was better. His prediction—a universally accessible encyclopedia indexing all human knowledge as a “complete planetary memory for all mankind” (https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/6827813-world-brain?from_search=true)—came to fruition, to some extent, through the internet (par. 5). It is likely far less organized than he predicted, and he could not have imagined the state of “facts” in the modern world (i.e. that there are “alternate” ones), but we have better access to the world's knowledge and to our past than ever before.

But What If We're Wrong? also dives headfirst into simulation theory, exploring the nature of reality and consciousness. Nick Bostrom's (<https://nickbostrom.com/>) theory suggests that humanity exists within a

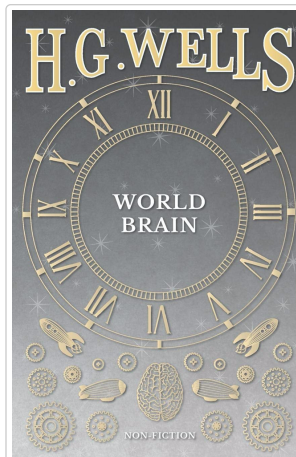


Image: World Brain book cover (Amazon Kindle Store)

Search...

C

Recent Posts

INFO 200 Blog 08: Reflections on the Semester and Makerspaces
(<https://ischoolblogs.sjsu.edu/info/musick/2019/12/01/info-200-blog-08-reflections-on-the-semester-and-makerspaces/>)

INFO 200 Blog 07: How to Be a Maker, or Emerging Technologies for Makers
(<https://ischoolblogs.sjsu.edu/info/musick/2019/12/01/info-200-blog-07-how-to-be-a-maker-or-emerging-technologies-for-makers/>)

INFO 200 Research: Information Behavior of Makers
(<https://ischoolblogs.sjsu.edu/info/musick/2019/12/01/info-200-research-information-behavior-of-makers/>)

INFO 200 Blog 06: Global Makers
(<https://ischoolblogs.sjsu.edu/info/musick/2019/11/21/info-200-blog-06-global-makers/>)

INFO 200 Blog 05: Teaching and Learning in Libraries Makerspace Edition
(<https://ischoolblogs.sjsu.edu/info/musick/2019/11/11/info-200-blog-05-teaching-and-learning-in-libraries-makerspace-edition/>)

Recent Comments

🗨 Dani Musick on INFO 200 Blog 07: How to Be a Maker, or Emerging Technologies for Makers
(<https://ischoolblogs.sjsu.edu/info/musick/2019/12/01/info-200-blog-07-how-to-be-a-maker-or-emerging-technologies-for-makers/#comment-33>)

🗨 Dani Musick on INFO 200 Blog 02: The Maker Community
(<https://ischoolblogs.sjsu.edu/info/musick/2019/09/11/info-200-blog-02-the-maker-community/#comment-32>)

🗨 Madison on INFO 200 Blog 07: How to Be a Maker, or Emerging Technologies for Makers
(<https://ischoolblogs.sjsu.edu/info/musick/2019/12/01/info-200-blog-07-how-to-be-a-maker-or-emerging-technologies-for-makers/#comment-31>)

🗨 Hannah M on INFO 200 Blog 02: The Maker Community
(<https://ischoolblogs.sjsu.edu/info/musick/2019/09/11/info-200-blog-02-the-maker-community/#comment-30>)

🗨 Dani Musick on INFO 200 Blog 06: Global Makers
(<https://ischoolblogs.sjsu.edu/info/musick/2019/11/21/info-200-blog-06-global-makers/#comment-29>)

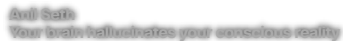
computer simulation, not an objectively real world (as cited in Klosterman, 2016, p. 121). Klosterman gets existential as he addresses a counterargument about the complexity of creating consciousness:

“Even if mankind is never able to create a digital character that’s fully conscious, it seems possible that mankind could create a digital character that *assumes* it is conscious, within the context of its program. Which actually sounds a lot like the experience we’re all having here, right now, on ‘Earth.’” (p. 123-124)

He acknowledges that such a theory is essentially impossible to confirm, but he is not interested in how humanity would come to realize our world is not real. Rather, he explores how that knowledge would change human behavior, suggesting that, in fact, nothing would change: “Simulate me, don’t simulate me—it’s all equally hopeless. We’re just here, and there’s nowhere else to be” (p. 129). It would be interesting to know, but it would not likely have any application to how we live. Life would go on, even if we are not, strictly speaking, alive.

Should we then stop pursuing such knowledge? If it has no impact on our actual lives, why do we need to know it? Dervin’s (1983) sense-making model (<https://faculty.washington.edu/wpratt/MEBI598/Methods/An%20Overview%20of%20Sense-Making%20Research%201983a.htm>) for information-seeking behavior provides some answers. She suggests people seek information to fill in gaps in their understanding of the world, and they try to make sense of that gap by bridging it to an anticipated outcome (p. 3) Her model operates from the premise that no information exists independently of the human mind (p. 4). Sense-making is an internally and externally motivated behavior; contexts can include an external problem in the world that needs solving as well as an internal desire for knowledge. Thus, even if learning about the nature of reality has no effect on the functioning of that reality, it might still be worth knowing for the sake of filling that knowledge gap.

Further, she argues that all information is subjective—the brain’s perception constrains the information it takes in (Dervin, 1983, p. 5). Anil Seth (<https://www.anilseth.com/>) (2017) expands on this idea when he suggests that information is not the external stimulus entering the brain; rather, that stimulus becomes information when the brain processes it with predictions, assumptions, and connections: “We don’t just passively perceive the world, we actively generate it.” Information is constrained by our humanness and by our understanding of reality: we cannot perceive something from a dog’s brain, and we cannot perceive something from the eyes of a human 500 years ago. All we can do is make educated guesses based on our own observations and keep trying to fill in the gaps.



Klosterman’s (2016) argument provides a similar sense of futility mixed with purpose: “If 90 percent of life is inscrutable, we need to embrace the 10 percent that seems forthright, lest we feel like life is a cruel, unmanageable joke” (p. 238). We will likely never understand everything about our world (or our reality), but the drive to learn is human nature and it helps keep us sane:

“There are intrinsic benefits to constantly probing the possibility that our assumptions about the future are wrong: humility and wonder. It’s good to view reality as beyond our understanding, because it is. And it’s exciting to imagine the prospect of a reality that cannot be imagined, because that’s as close to pansophical omniscience as we will ever come.” (p. 252)

There is value in simple, scientific curiosity. We may well be wrong about what we think we know, and there is no way to find out without exploring the question in the first place.

References

Archives

- December 2019 (<https://ischoolblogs.sjsu.edu/info/musick/2019/12/>)
- November 2019 (<https://ischoolblogs.sjsu.edu/info/musick/2019/11/>)
- October 2019 (<https://ischoolblogs.sjsu.edu/info/musick/2019/10/>)
- September 2019 (<https://ischoolblogs.sjsu.edu/info/musick/2019/09/>)
- August 2019 (<https://ischoolblogs.sjsu.edu/info/musick/2019/08/>)
- January 2019 (<https://ischoolblogs.sjsu.edu/info/musick/2019/01/>)

Categories

- Uncategorized (<https://ischoolblogs.sjsu.edu/info/musick/category/uncategorized/>)

Meta

- Site Admin (<https://ischoolblogs.sjsu.edu/info/musick/wp-admin/>)
- Log out (https://ischoolblogs.sjsu.edu/info/musick/wp-login.php?action=logout&_wpnonce=90e3c99075)
- Entries feed (<https://ischoolblogs.sjsu.edu/info/musick/feed/>)
- Comments feed (<https://ischoolblogs.sjsu.edu/info/musick/comments/feed/>)
- WordPress.org (<https://wordpress.org/>)



Bates, M. J. (2009). Information. In *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences*, (3rd ed.). Retrieved from infocom.hyperlib.sjsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Information_Bates.pdf (https://infocom.hyperlib.sjsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Information_Bates.pdf)

Dervin, B. (1983). An overview of sense-making research: Concepts, methods, and results to date. Retrieved from <https://faculty.washington.edu/wpratt/MEBI598/Methods/An%20Overview%20of%20Sense-Making%20Research%201983a.htm> (<https://faculty.washington.edu/wpratt/MEBI598/Methods/An%20Overview%20of%20Sense-Making%20Research%201983a.htm>)

Klosterman, C. (2016). *But what if we're wrong?: Thinking about the present as if it were the past* [Kindle version]. New York: Penguin Books.

Seth, A. (2017, April). *Your brain hallucinates your conscious reality* [Video]. Ted. Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/anil_seth_how_your_brain_hallucinates_your_conscious_reality?language=en (https://www.ted.com/talks/anil_seth_how_your_brain_hallucinates_your_conscious_reality?language=en)

Wells, H. G. (1937). World brain: The idea of a permanent world encyclopedia. Retrieved from https://sherlock.ischool.berkeley.edu/wells/world_brain.html (https://sherlock.ischool.berkeley.edu/wells/world_brain.html)

 permalink (<https://ischoolblogs.sjsu.edu/info/musick/2019/09/22/info-200-book-review-but-what-if-were-wrong/>).  Edit (<https://ischoolblogs.sjsu.edu/info/musick/wp-admin/post.php?post=23&action=edit>)

◀ INFO 200 Blog 02: The Maker Community (<https://ischoolblogs.sjsu.edu/info/musick/2019/09/15/info-200-blog-02-the-maker-community/>)

INFO 200 Blog 03: Information Seeking for Makers ▶ (<https://ischoolblogs.sjsu.edu/info/musick/2019/10/03/info-200-blog-03-information-seeking-for-makers/>)

Leave a Reply

Logged in as Michael Stephens (<https://ischoolblogs.sjsu.edu/info/members/michael/profile/edit/>). [Log out?](#) (https://ischoolblogs.sjsu.edu/info/musick/wp-login.php?action=logout&redirect_to=https%3A%2F%2Fischoolblogs.sjsu.edu%2Finfo%2Fmusick%2F2019%2F09%2F22%2Finfo-200-book-review-but-what-if-were-wrong%2F&_wpnonce=90e3c99075)

Comment

Post Comment