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Context Book Review: But What If We're Wrong? We Probably Already Are

Posted on September 23, 2020 by Corrina

Klosterman, C. (2016). *But what if we're wrong? Thinking about the present as if it were the past*. Blue Rider Press.



Photo by C. Oates.

deal. [1]

This idea plays into the larger premise of Chuck Klosterman's 2016 book, *But what if we're wrong? Thinking about the present as if it were the past*. Essentially, Klosterman is examining how our present will be evaluated in the future in terms of what we got right, what we got wrong, and how we will be remembered—if at all—chiefly in the areas of literature, music, science, television, sports, and politics.

More than this, though, as Klosterman states, "this is a book about continuums" (2016, p. 101). Meaning, when looking at a specific time in history, including our own, the contemporary attitudes towards the above listed six realms are directly influenced by what came before and will directly influence what comes after. Our present isn't static, it doesn't stand alone, and you can't define it without understanding its foundation and how it could potentially guide the future. But we really only "know" the past and the present, "when you're gazing into the haze of a distant tomorrow, *everything* is an assumption" (Klosterman, 2016, p. 17). There is also an infinite number of possibilities—especially if you believe the multiverse theory (Klosterman, 2016, pp. 103-105)—which means there is an infinite number of ways that what we currently hold as right is wrong or will be thought of as wrong since it is in the future that our present will be evaluated. So, not only do we not know if we're wrong, we have no idea in which way we will be wrong. Moreover, we can be right about something, then wrong about something, and then right again. Klosterman illustrates this with an anecdote of his childhood obsession with dinosaurs and the beleaguered brontosaurus, which went from being a brontosaurus to an apatosaurus and then back to a brontosaurus (2016, p. 98). "What was (once) always true was (suddenly) never true and then (suddenly) accidentally true" (Klosterman, 2016, p. 98). There is no clear-cut end to our rightness or wrongness—it is a continuum of right/wrong.

As LIS professionals, we are stewards of information; we do not necessarily evaluate the information which we steward in terms of right and wrong. We are more concerned with connecting our patron/user/community with their desired information. As Bates writes, "The primary domain of study in the information disciplines is the world of exosomatic information and human beings' relationship to that world as creators, designers, and users" (2017a, p. 2060). But in his quest to challenge what some may call basic concepts and his exploration of the right/wrong continuum, Klosterman raises some important ideas about information behavior; how we exchange and share information; and what implications these may have on the future of libraries and the information communities they serve.

In one of my personal favorite chapters, "The World That Is Not There," Klosterman poses his readers this question: "*Discounting those events that occurred within your lifetime, what do you know about human history that was not communicated to you by someone else?*" (2016, p. 137). This idea is central to information behavior. From the more formal information seeking/searching/using behaviors to Erdelez's Information Encountering,[2] where a user is not actively seeking information but encounters it in a routine activity or unrelated information search (1999, pp. 25-26), people are constantly receiving information from someone or something else about *everything*.

And there is so much information now. The era of centralized information is over, "so every idea has the same potential for distribution and acceptance" (Klosterman, 2016, p. 41). On one hand, this is great. There are fewer barriers to information for users in the digital age, and this, as outlined in Dresang and Koh's Radical Change Theory, increases interactivity, connectivity, and access (2009), which are some of the same pillars of an effective information community (Fisher & Bishop, pp. 22-23). On the other hand, this plays into the principle of least effort: "ease of access and ease of use matters more to people than the quality of the information" (Bates, 2017b, p. 2080). We have to be savvy information seekers and users to determine the credibility of the wealth of information available to us. But not everyone is, and that's how you get information communities who believe in, oh, I don't know, QAnon.

There was one line that stuck out to me in Klosterman's chapter about politics, "The Case Against Freedom." In it, he discusses Ronald Reagan and how "he was, factually, a bad president" (2016, p. 204). Nevertheless, he was and is still considered by many a great leader.[3] Klosterman, though, attributes this to the idea that, "If people feel optimistic about where they live, details don't matter" (2016, p. 204). Meaning, the 1980s *looked* good; accumulating wealth and appearing wealthy was *de rigeur* and the decade *felt* prosperous even if *you* were not (Klosterman, 2016, p. 204). This directly echoes Savolainen's Small World Theory: "Small world inhabitants ignore information if they perceive their world is working without it (i.e., they have enough certainty, comfort, and situational predictability so that the need to seek information is negated)" (2017, p. 1509). In the larger picture, this makes me think about how 2020 will be remembered when, at least in the U.S., we are facing health, environmental, and economic crises. People are not only seeking information because of our precarious situation, but we are creating so much content because, well, we have the time. Most of this content is digital, as the time necessitates, so not only will our present situation be well-documented, but it will be easily accessed. But how will people in the future know to trust it? As Klosterman states, "We understand the past through the words of those who experienced it. But those individuals aren't necessarily reliable" (2016, p. 154). What *if* the ideas of QAnon are what people in the future think were our prevailing beliefs? I would like to think that this is an impossibility, but as Klosterman's Razor states: "the best hypothesis is the one that reflexively accepts its potential wrongness to begin with" (2016, p. 17). Regardless, as LIS professionals, we need to be good stewards of information. And this doesn't mean to censor anything by any means, it just means that we need to provide thoughtful, well curated archives and databases so that information users of the future can make well-informed analyses of the past (present). We also need to help people develop good information behavior. And, most importantly, we need to "start from the premise that—in all likelihood—we are already wrong" (Klosterman, 2016, p. 12).

[1] But that necessitates a larger and more nuanced discussion. [Return](#).

[2] There's a great anecdote Klosterman relates about how he encountered Alexander Herzen's quote, "History is the autobiography of a madman," not by reading it in a book but rather on a promotional t-shirt (2016, p. 201) that perfectly illustrates Information Encountering. [Return](#).

[3] For a humorous and robust look at Reagan, listen to *The Dollop's* two-part episode on him. [Return](#).

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2020-09-23 | 11:09:28 AM

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2 thoughts on “Context Book Review: But What If We're Wrong? We Probably Already Are”



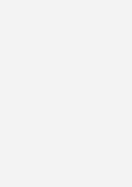
Justine says:
September 26, 2020 at 11:10 am (Edit)

This was such an interesting read that gave me a lot to think about. I like the idea of a right and wrong continuum, especially because there are many different cultures with various beliefs. I know as a Filipino-American by beliefs tend to be different than people who are only Filipino.

The quotes "If people feel optimistic about where they live, details don't matter" and "We understand the past through the words of those who experienced it. But those individuals aren't necessarily reliable" remind me of learning history during different phases of school. It felt like every few years we would learn that someone before left something out or the reason someone went to war was different from what we were taught a few years ago. I'm not sure why this happens, but the way I learned history definitely shapes how I think now.

Again, I really enjoyed your review. It made me think about how professionals we have to be with information as future information professionals.

[Reply](#)



Corrina says:
September 30, 2020 at 10:05 pm (Edit)

Justine, I am so sorry it's taken me so long to reply. Thank you for your kind words and your insight about the right/wrong continuum in regards to culture and beliefs.

I was struck, too, by the quote about the unreliability of historical records/accounts of events. I always wondered as I was learning history how we could trust that this was true. And you're right, we are constantly learning that what we were taught about history was wrong for so many reasons—usually because it's traditionally been white cis het men who are documenting things, so that's the view of the world we are taught—but not all of us experience.

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