

Globalizing Knowledge for the Future, Then and Now

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In these last nearly 40 years of studying sociology and conducting sociological research, I have always focused on the future. I called my early scholarship “critical sociology” as I was focused on alternative futures embedded in the possibilities of the present. That commitment to critical sociology was formed in Poland, hence my dedication to the place. My doctoral dissertation focused on the Solidarity movement of 1980-81. To study Solidarity in the 1980s meant to focus on those alternative futures embedded in the present. But those futures were different then than they are now.

One of my subsequent students, Daina Stukuls Eglitis, made a terrific argument about how the revolutions of the late 1980s and early 1990s against communist rule were struggles to realize normality. Of course there were many different versions of normality – based on what might be elsewhere, or what was once. The utopia of that time was really eutopic – a valuation of what ought be normal. The common sense of the time was that the struggle for utopia, for that communist utopia, contributed to the making of dystopia. I was in Poland in 1984, and I read George Orwell repeatedly, there, or should I say here, given that my voice, if not body, is in Poland now.

Even if that normal animated a struggle for, a hope for, an alternative future different from a future based on a smooth extension of a communist ruled present, it required an imagination

of how things could otherwise be. And that imagination was easy. One needed, if one looked to the West for the normal, merely, if possible, to travel or watch Western movies. If it was a normal based on the interwar period, one need only talk to one's grandparents, if they could talk. Imagination needed not be too imaginative.

That's all different now. And that's why my book, [Globalizing Knowledge](#), is much more an invitation to constructing a field than it is an explanation for a historical transformations as my [first two books](#) were. Globalizing knowledge, I would like to think, is part of a movement, part of a knowledge network, that takes the point I am about to make as point of departure.

There is no more normal.

The societies in which we live are, not, "normal", and certainly the futures we wish to see, or are afraid to imagine, are not normal either. Even the normative is being shredded.

If we wish to thrive, if we wish even to survive, we cannot imagine the future as a smooth extension of the present in which we live. We need a much more vigorous sense of what can be, what ought to be, and a network of mutually interested and caring people to help create it. For that reason, I am glad to be with you virtually today.

To start, consider, after all, how unsustainable our present is. We are in the midst of systemic crises made worse by the denial of too many to acknowledge our location in that crisis. We all should know of the planetary crisis global warming produces. Too few know of, but thanks to [Jyoti Sharma](#) more shall know of, the global crisis of water consumption we suffer.

Too few know of the drift toward war more and more experience. The crisis of Crimea and eastern Ukraine motivates those on NATO's eastern flank to prepare evermore seriously for Putinesque violations of peaceable conventions and the boundaries that assure them. Americans hear of this occasionally, with this account of [Estonians](#) recently causing quite a stir of interest.

The wars that continue to destroy Syria and Iraq, the instability surrounding Afghanistan and its borderlands, cannot be contained in their boundaries or even the neighborhood. Refugees not only threaten the ease with which we divide the world into us and them, but threaten our very moral foundations *if* solidarity still matters. The European Union, rather than a beacon of hope and vehicle for a form of globalization based on more moral principles than markets allow, becomes instead a fortress desperately trying to figure out how to remain afloat. Brexit is just the tip of an iceberg threatening to sink that EU Floating Fortress.

Each of these crises, each of these expressions of unsustainability, rests on a systemic crisis of a different sort, a kind of communicative crisis made all the more urgent by the measure of communicative capacities we now enjoy.

This communicative capacity, enabled by but not exhaustively connoted by the information and communication technological revolution, moves us to consume images and sounds on an unprecedented scale, with *some* sense of proximity and thus familiarity. However, simultaneously, it creates a proximity inflected by a measure of distance that enables us to feel remote, and not responsible, even as things are familiar. It produces a new level of alienation from our common humanity.

But it's not just this imbalanced sense of familiarity that our new communicative capacity produces. It also changes our identity, and ought change the way in which we construct our identifications.

We now have new identities based on networks of information and communication that appear to be captured with categorical labels like Web-Kids, Millennials or Fundamentalists. But these labels don't suffice. These new identifications move far beyond common attitudes or convenient demographics, and are rather based on the intensity of information sharing within networks. That in turn reinforces the conviction that one's newsfeed is the right feed.

With this mode of communication, we see an escalation of distrust, a collapse of generalized authority, and an increasing alienation from the systems that envelop us. We are more readily able to assign to others if not demonic powers then at least demonic intentions. And given the precarious state of our life worlds, such attributions can find ready resonance.

We give ourselves license to disregard those beyond our network. That in turn can move those beyond our network to behave in ways that appear to confirm the justice of our own alienation from them, of our damnation of them. Civil war, or at least systemically disruptive violence, is now something we can worry about, even in America.

In short, the real crises destroying the foundations for our biological survival, in the increasing temperature of our planet and the depletion of our water supplies, are amplified by the failures of our communicative systems. Those modes of information and communication fragment our interpretation of very real crises, which in turn make us turn away from the real problems to address pseudo problems *as if* they were the ones most pressing.

Of course you can hear the American in me right now.

Our electoral contest for President has become the worst instance I can imagine, although Poland rivals in its own political circumstance. Somehow we have become the land where the wrongful use of email servers supplants meaningful debates over how to address the refugee crisis, global warming, increasing violence by the state against its people, and intensifying war. That focus on political hate will become a self-fulfilling prophecy; the reckless politicking we have seen in the last year will likely produce a political crisis, possibly even a civil war I can only hope remains non-violent. And that self-destructive spiral to hell will prevent us from addressing any of the systemic crises that threaten our very survival.

Such dystopian thinking threatens to ruin my reputation as an optimist. But I do see hope.

I see hope in the kinds of work that issues forth from those who struggle to redefine the relationship between knowledge and practice. Certainly this is apparent in Ashoka networks that are both at SGH and University of Warsaw, just as they are at Brown, and, as I have learned recently from my student, Isabella Luksic James, in Chile. She is studying how Ashoka and like-minded actors translate the principles of social innovation and social entrepreneurship to make them suitable in Chile, much as my Polish colleagues, [Maria Rogaczewska](#), [Maria Szymborska](#), and [Ola Goldys](#), studied that translation between Providence and Poland. I might propose that this interest among academics in social innovation reflects the ways in which academic authority is dispersing, or where, at least, we are beginning to recognize the variety of ways in which we might measure academic value and worth. That, to me, is all to the good.

I also see hope in new kinds of protest. #BlackLivesMatter is a terrific example of how various social media have enabled a consciousness to take root. While we might hear refrains of #AllLivesMatter or #BlueLivesMatter, that very response illustrates the ways in which murders of Black people by state authorities is now part of the broader American sensibility, and not just a familiar matter for those in and with ties to the Black Community.

I see hope in the struggle in North Dakota against the routing of an oil pipeline across lands sacred to the Sioux people, threatening water supplies that could endanger their very survival as a people in place. The measure of solidarity, both performed from a distance and actual in place, that enables that protest to continue, and even become global while remaining rooted in Standing Rock, suggests a new subjectivity emerging, one that sees connections across distant places, one that enables us to see in the fates of others our very own possibilities.

I see hope in new kinds of scholarship that work across very different disciplinary domains. Let me recommend to you all, for it is very much in the spirit of what you discuss today, a work by Ann Pendleton-Jullian and John Seely Brown called the [Pragmatic Imagination](#). In it, they invite us not only to move beyond the deductive and inductive imaginations that seem to shape our social sciences and political discourses all too much for the kind of crisis world in which we live. They invite us too to engage abductive reason, that “kind of best guess hypothetical reasoning” which relies more on speculation, less on existing facts. Indeed, for those of you who appreciate jazz music, who see the value in abstract art, who can see the point of humanities pointing us beyond the conventions of our no longer normal world, you will find in the guidance of this computer scientist and architect a new way of approaching the world.

They have six principles in this pragmatic imagination that you might yourselves enjoy considering as you yourselves anticipate futures this evening. I think focusing on these 4, which I summarize in my own way here, might be the best way to start.

1. Consider where the imagination sits in the entire spectrum of diverse cognitive processes as an entire spectrum of that organize our activity.
2. Consider how imagination can both resolve and widen the gap between the unfamiliar and the familiar... and reflect on when sense-breaking can be as important as, or even more important than, sense making.
3. Envision the pragmatic imagination as one that pro-actively imagines the actual in light of meaningfully purposeful possibilities and sees the opportunity in everything.
4. Finally, remember that thought and action are indivisible and reciprocal, but that the disruptive imagination is especially important when you live in a world that requires radically new visions and actions.

We live in that world today. There is no normal, and there is too little normative. But we need a new way to connect, to produce a new way of being, a new kind of solidarity, out of the networks we inhabit. We need those communicative structures to become more inclusive, not more exclusive or hateful. We need to find ways to develop an imagination that does not rely on ever narrower sets of interests and concerns, but wider arrays of what matters and why. We need be open to learning. And we need figure the modes of information and communication that direct our attention to the crises that demand a new imagination to address.

I trust that in your community today, you have that commitment, and that possibility. We need it.

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Kennedy was the University of Michigan's first vice provost for international affairs in addition to being director of an institute and five centers and programs at UM; he also served as the Howard R. Swearer Director of the Watson Institute for International Studies. Kennedy just concluded nine years of service on the Executive Committee and Board of Directors at the Social Science Research Council and began work on the Advisory Board of the Open Society Foundations' Higher Education Support Program.

His latest book, ["Globalizing Knowledge: Intellectuals, Universities, and Publics in Transformation"](#), is recently published by Stanford University Press.