



Workaday Democracy

Do you live in a democracy? Do you work in a democracy? These are not rhetorical questions, but serious ones that we should all take some time to think through. As information professionals, our commitment to the free flow of information, to the critical evaluation of information, and to the ethical use of information in our service to others greatly impacts issues around what we might think of as everyday democracy.

Most of the people I know in the U.S. would start out with an affirmative—we do live in a democracy, of a kind. Our country is a constitutional republic. Depending on your politics, you might argue that we would be a stronger republic if Congress elected the president. Or maybe you think that would make our system less democratic, because it is a step further removed from the will of the people, even if a move toward the direct input of the people has enabled our executive branch to assume greater and greater power over time. Maybe you're with those who see our system as a plutocracy or even an oligarchy ruled by some occult "break-away civilization." But for most us, the answer is still at least a mild yes, America is a democracy.

But do you work in a democracy? If we are lucky enough to have jobs at all, we may spend more than one-third of our adult lives in some kind of workplace. Jobs have bosses. Bosses tell you what to do, and you must do it if you want to keep your job. This is not democratic. For the vast majority of workers, perhaps worldwide, democracy and work do not overlap—work is about a strict hierarchy in which you obey the will of the supervisor above you, he (it is still usually a "he") must obey the will of the supervisor he answers to, and so on. How can authoritarian structures be universally experienced as daily reality in democratic systems (local, state, national, and international), which so often present themselves as antagonistic to

authoritarianism? And where are we now, such that we should feel it ought to ever be any different?

The Plow, the Loom, the Cog

Hierarchies seem to be the fundamental organizational structure for our primate kin and for most of the human experience as well. Indeed, most social animals, including alpha wolves and silverback gorillas, do not self-organize into democracies. Perhaps because of the value that we in the West place on our foundational mythologies—Socrates being free to ask those tough questions about the gods, Roman senators rising up against and murdering a tyrant, and rich agrarian colonial deists saying "no more" to their king—we forget that most of human experience has been and remains authoritarian and hierarchical. There is also room here to create a Venn diagram, as we may have a hierarchical democracy, authoritarian anarchy, or plutocratic socialism, but for most of us, the experience of working is one that still borrows heavily from agricultural and Industrial Age management.

The Industrial Revolution gave us forms of management that allowed capitalists to use humans to operate mechanical tools to transform capital into goods for sale. In that system, little strongmen on the factory floor had no incentive to advocate for the needs of their staffers. Many of us still work in these conditions. The strict timing and grueling work in Amazon's warehouses are great examples of a high-tech Information Age company that's still in need of human tools to produce profit (theverge.com/2018/4/16/17243026/amazon-warehouse-jobs-worker-conditions-bathroom-breaks). Amazon continues to robotize its workforce, and whenever it can save money by doing so, it will continue to obviate humans in order to automate repetitive processes for profit.

Some types of work, though, have never been a good fit for Industrial Age management. Many of you reading this will be doing analytical or creative work for corporations, governments, or educational organizations. This work is probably done best when you are not managed in the same way that a seamstress or a box builder is managed. In educational institutions especially, the structure and the management of the system should lend themselves to democratic values that encourage open participation and the exchange of information.

Get Outta Here, You Commie!

Democracy in the workplace need not necessarily take the form of socialism, unions, or even direct democracy. Maybe we are reluctant to let our ivory towers go truly democratic because we fear that the communities around us will assume we are turning red. Academics are often demonized already as out-of-touch elitists, and the taint of collectivization may be a bridge too far for too many of us.

And yet, so many information professionals linger in silos supervised by petit hierarchs. How can we advocate for Information Age values if we are ordered around and barked at within Industrial Age organizational matrices? To freely speak respectfully, to know each other and trust each other's work, to create opportunities for dialogue, debate, and transparent decision making—this is the challenge of democratizing our workplaces.

Enabling Networks

This is the Information Age, but it exists within and because of previous and ongoing eras. Industry and mechanization let us improve the efficiency of agriculture, but we in no way left agriculture behind because of mechanization; our ability to store and use information has allowed us to expand our industrial capabilities. Information tools let us multiply the power of earlier types of tools. Now we must find a way to apply those tools to management wherever appropriate and useful.

Leaving behind patterns such as "the highest paid person's opinion"

in favor of flat networks will enable a true experience of daily democracy. Democratic, self-organized, heuristical networks (teachthought.com/pedagogy/a-primer-in-heutagogy-and-self-directed-learning) will create a system whereby the people who do the actual work are empowered to best decide how that work gets done, where it gets done, who gets to hear about it, and how to deal with the consequences. Democratic networks create situations in which managers are transformed from hierarchical supervisors into nodes that move information forward. These nodes empower staffers on the edges of the network to influence other areas of the network.

And that is good management. Advocating for those who we would in our current system say are "beneath" us means getting the information, tools, and attention they need from elsewhere in the network to flow to wherever they need it to be to serve the end users. Good management means getting out of the way of those doing the work so that they can do it better ... and better ... and better (rework.withgoogle.com/subjects/managers).

And maybe you are not a small-d democrat. There are other effective forms of government, although they all come with a price. Benign autocracy works well enough in some places in the world, as long as the oil money flows and the supermarket shelves stay stocked. And in a democracy, of course, sometimes the majority is wrong—and we all have to live with the consequences. As Winston Churchill said, "No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time. ..."

Democracy is the system we've got, at least on paper, and the future of academia, creative work, and information professionals should be a networked and democratic one.

Liberté, égalité, fraternité!

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