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Introduction

IN MARCH 2020, as the coronavirus crisis started hitting the United States, the *Financial Times* published a cartoon by James Ferguson showing President Donald Trump sitting in the Oval Office with a surgical mask over his eyes and his hands clamped firmly over his ears. On the floor, a picture shows Chinese president Xi Jinping wearing a surgical mask made from the Chinese flag. While one leader is closing his eyes and ears, the other's mouth is covered by the symbols of country and ideology. The spreading of the virus has presented the world with its biggest challenge in dealing with the unknown in a century. Ignorance, denial, and negation all played their part at the start of the pandemic, as highlighted in extreme relief by the behavior of the US president. At first, Trump ignored the danger of the infection spreading in the United States. In January and February 2020, when coronavirus was propagating rapidly around the world, Trump claimed that there was no need for concern in the United States because there were only a few people infected, and they had all come from abroad. In denial of events as they unfolded, he assured the public that "everything is under control," that "the new virus is not more dangerous than the flu,"

and that he had a "natural capacity" to understand the infection. When it became impossible to continue ignoring the pandemic, Trump changed tack, and this time declared a "war" against the "invisible enemy." The president did not recognize the severity of the situation because he was suddenly convinced by the experts, or because he had new information; rather, he told the public he had known all along how serious it was: "I felt it was a pandemic long before it was called a pandemic." He then added, "But we are going to defeat the invisible enemy. I think we are going to do it even faster than we thought, and it'll be a complete victory. It'll be a total victory."[1]

A decade previously, the writers of *The Simpsons* had imagined a drug that induced a similar degree of blind optimism. In a well-known episode, Lisa has to give a presentation at school on what Springfield will look like in fifty years' time. Diligent as ever, she immerses herself in climate change research and presents a grim outlook for her hometown. Her presentation is so frightening that her teachers urge her parents to have her assessed by a psychiatrist. After the examination, the doctor diagnoses Lisa with environment-related despair and prescribes her a drug called Ignorital. With the help of this drug, Lisa's perception of the world changes; released from despair, she becomes overwhelmingly optimistic. Clouds appear to her as smiling teddy bears, and she continuously hears in her head the song "What a Wonderful World." Lisa's parents struggle to cope with this optimistic delirium and decide to take her off Ignorital. Marge and Homer realize that the old, pessimistic Lisa was easier to handle than the madly cheerful one.

The idea that a drug or some other form of treatment might help us ignore those parts of reality we find hard to bear is not confined to fiction. For decades, science has tried to find a way to subdue the traumatic memories of war veterans or victims of

other violence. These studies sometimes suggest that a drug that allows someone to forget traumatic violence might be of special help to those who have been raped or suffered terrifying assault or sexual abuse. The ethical debates surrounding the use of drugs or other means to alleviate memories of violence often focus on whether it is possible or desirable to erase only selected parts of the memory and what would happen if the perpetrators of violent crimes or abuse could access such memory-eliminating drugs to escape being identified or persecuted. Yet even without such drugs, people find ways to ignore, deny, or negate knowledge that threatens their well-being.

Each epoch is marked by its own ignorance. The way people relate to knowledge is highly contextual; and what is considered to be knowledge is not only socially constructed but also highly individual. To complicate things further, people often embrace ignorance or denial (which, as we shall see later, are not the same thing) when they come close to knowledge that is somehow unbearable.

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan borrowed the term "a passion for ignorance," found in Buddhist studies, to describe how his patients did everything they could to avoid acknowledging the cause of their suffering, even though most of them came to him claiming that they wanted to understand it. Lacan also looked at ignorance on the side of the analyst and concluded that the analyst should not take the position of "the one who knows the answers," but rather should embrace the position of nonknowledge and allow analysands to discover for themselves what underlay their symptoms.

This book will explore the nature of the passion for ignorance. On the one hand it will examine how we try to avoid dealing with traumatic knowledge, and on the other hand it will analyze how societies find ever new ways to deny information

that might undermine the power structures or ideological mechanisms that maintain the existing order. In addition, I will try to explain how in postindustrial, knowledge-based societies, the power of ignorance has acquired a surprising new strength, even as people can now learn more about each other and themselves than ever before with the help of science and new technology. The way we relate to knowledge is never neutral, which is why the term "passion," which *Merriam-Webster* defines as an "intense, driving, or overmastering feeling or conviction,"[2] can help us understand not only why people embrace what is perceived as truth but also why they ignore, deny, or negate it. Curiosity is for some a passion, and when people stop questioning established knowledge, the lack of this passion might very well open new doors to ignorance.[3]

The concept of ignorance needs to be reexamined because we are undergoing a revolutionary change in the nature of knowledge. The development of genetics, neuroscience, and big data has changed our understanding of what can be known about the individual. With new kinds of information come new anxieties, spurred by the difficulties in comprehending what this information means, by questions concerning who has access to it, and by concerns about who can use or manipulate it. The emergence of new types of information in the field of medicine means that the question of whether "to know or not to know" has become of vital importance for the individual. It is equally important that ignorance is examined in relation to new mechanisms of power. In the second half of the twentieth century, the French philosopher Michel Foucault wrote at length about the relation between power and knowledge; today, the relation between power and ignorance demands equal attention.

People have always found ways to close their eyes, ears, and mouths in order to ignore, deny, and negate information that they find disturbing. They will identify with a leader even if his or her discourse is full of lies. What is different in these "post-truth" times is the rise of "cognitive inertia"—an increase of indifference to what is truth and what is a lie. This indifference is linked to an inability to know and not a simple lack of willingness to learn. If we look at how "fake" news is transmitted via the internet, it is often difficult to identify its sources and not at all clear what it is trying to achieve. In August 2017, for example, a campaign on Twitter with the hashtag #borderfreecoffee created a fake promotion by Starbucks offering illegal immigrants a free Frappuccino in Starbucks coffee shops across America on a certain day. Starbucks worked hard to convince their customers that the offer was a hoax. Some people thought that it might have been created by pro-immigrant hackers. But in fact the opposite was true. The hoax was hatched by people opposed to immigration who thought it would be a great idea to entice illegal immigrants to a particular place and then, while they were waiting in line for a free drink, get the police to arrest them. While some fake news campaigns have an underlying political or economic agenda, many are simply tools to gather more clicks and thereby gain more advertising revenue. With the proliferation of fake news, it is not surprising that mistrust in all sources of news is on the rise. Indifference and ignorance in such cases act as a protective shield for the individual who is continuously having to assess what information to trust and what not to. As William Davis has noted, this becomes a serious political problem when people turn against all representations and framings of reality in the media, believing them all to be equally biased, because then

they believe either that there is no truth or that there exists outside normal channels of political communication some purer, unmediated access to truth.[4]

In this book I will address two intimately related topics: not knowing (ignorance) and not acknowledging (ignoring). Both states of mind are hugely relevant to our society, our culture, and our intellectual life today. Ignorance and ignoring both present problems, and at times both have their uses and benefits. For example, ignorance presents a danger when it is treated as a virtue in itself, or if it is seen as a shameful state that we must strive to escape through consumption in the postmodern "knowledge economy." Conversely, ignorance provides a natural buffer as we strive to understand who we are and what our place in the world could be. Ignorance usefully marks the point where a professional's expertise can go no further; more profoundly, it sets a boundary to what we can reasonably expect of people, individually and collectively.

The act of ignoring something, consciously or unconsciously, takes a similarly diverse range of forms. Sometimes to deny what one patently sees may be a strategy[5] on which survival depends; at other times, denial perpetuates the collective fear on which abusive relationships and tyrannical hierarchies depend. But ignorance may also be a way of refusing to acknowledge such power structures, thereby weakening them or even bringing them down.

Psychoanalytic knowledge about people's attitudes toward truth can be helpful in analyzing the forms of ignorance in postindustrial society. Given the power of genetics, forensics, and big data, it is important to look at how people take in this new knowledge and how these sciences are creating both new beliefs in truth and new forms of ignorance.

Chapter 1 asks how our perception of ignorance has changed in contemporary Western society and why the so-called knowledge economy is actually an ignorance economy. To understand how people embrace ignorance and denial in times of crisis, it is useful to look at how these two strategies have been adopted by those who have experienced war. Chapter 2 looks at ignorance and denial among refugees who fled violence during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina between 1992 and 1995. Many of those people who lost loved ones hope that finding their remains with the aid of DNA will help them to come to terms with their trauma. Developments in genetics, neuroscience, and big data have also led to a belief in the power of DNA more generally and given some the sense that it is possible to come close to the secret of subjectivity itself. But what do we gain by trying to "see" inside the body and by trying to predict and prevent future illnesses with the help of genetic tests? Chapter 3 looks at the fantasies that people create around genes, how they rethink family heritage when they get tested for genetic diseases, and what new anxieties, shame, sorrow, and guilt people suffer from when they try to make sense of their genetic blueprint.

Where traumatic knowledge affects an individual's well-being, ignorance often goes hand in hand with denial. Chapter 4 describes how this operates in relation to health more broadly. In these times of informed consent, people are expected to be fully informed about their illnesses, the range of available medical procedures, and their risks. But people often choose to close their eyes when they face life-threatening issues.

With new types of knowledge about people, forming romantic relationships is increasingly difficult. In order to be attractive to others, people are often advised to appear to be indifferent

toward a potential object of affection. Chapter 5 goes on to examine how ignorance works on the intersubjective level, especially in cases of love and hate.

In today's highly individualized society, many people feel that they have been overlooked by others and ignored by society. Some, like the online movement of incels, seek visibility through misogynist writings on the internet, and sometimes with actual physical attacks on innocent people. Chapter 6 explores how the feeling that one has been ignored can be linked to a neoliberal ideology of success and its often "macho" imagery. This ideology has paradoxically contributed to the inadequacy, anxiety, and guilt that people now feel.

In the age of algorithms, big data is changing the way we think about ourselves. Ignorance, however, plays an important role in the way data is collected and used. As in the field of medicine, so in the domain of big data, informed consent obfuscates the mechanisms of power and thus maintains them and contributes to a further increase in ignorance. Chapter 7 reflects on the ideology of self-improvement, which has contributed to an increase in mobile phone applications and various wearable devices with the help of which people hope to change their habits and become more productive while ignoring the fact that these devices are collecting data about them. Those who control society today, be it politically, socially, or commercially, very much rely on the analysis, manipulation, and control of people's behavior with the help of the data collected about them, which is why the opaque world of big data presents an important element in the relationship between power and ignorance.

In times driven by the new fantasies formed around the presumed "truth" about ourselves (fueled by the fascination with genes, brains, and big data) and by the emergence of fake news,

which makes it hard to discern where information is coming from and how accurate it is, it is not surprising that ignorance is on the rise. In some cases, this might actually have a positive effect, since it allows people to distance themselves from the dominant ideology and possibly engage in new forms of reflection. However, it is equally important to discern how the mechanisms of power themselves rely on keeping people in the dark about the way they operate.

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