The pressures of organizations and the responsibilities of university professors

Try a simple experiment. Substitute the word *propaganda* for the word *knowledge* in Naisbitt’s statement:

In the information society, we have systematized the production of propaganda and amplified our brainpower. To use an industrial metaphor, we now mass-produce propaganda and this propaganda is the driving force of our economy.

Clearly, the tone of the statement has changed. It sounds more ominous, more like a statement from Orwell’s 1984. Little in Naisbitt’s book distinguishes between *propaganda* and *knowledge*. What is more disturbing is that little within the current university scene suggests that such a distinction is in the minds of the institutions’ perceived leaders.

Both propaganda and knowledge are forms of information. Why not substitute one for the other? If we are unable to make the distinction and put it into practice, then it seems reasonable to assume that information will be shaped and guided to propagate (sustain, support, cause to continue) the systems that produce and distribute the information. We expect industry to train people to propagate itself and its products. It is no secret that the assessment studies (environmental impact studies, benefit–cost analyses) are often slanted to propagate the agencies and the projects on which these agencies depend (Matzke et al. 1976). Look at television. Can there be any doubt that television seeks to propagate itself and the products that sustain it?

But, of course, there is a moral difference between propaganda and knowledge. A moral purpose of universities is to make a difference, serving knowledge so that mere propaganda can be exposed, resisted, and corrected. If, however, inquiry finds that such a purpose is not being well served, we have a moral basis for criticizing conditions, assessing proposed changes, and, for some of us, changing our own behaviors. This article conducts such an inquiry.

**Systemic distortion**

In the knowledge society it is not the individual who performs. The individual is a cost center rather than a performance center. It is the organization that performs. (Drucker 1994, p. 71)

Propaganda is characterized by a selective process that persuasively, pervasively, and persistently shapes information to be favorable to the dominant systems that distribute resources and authority. Within such systems, certain inquiries are pursued and other inquiries are avoided. Favorable information tends to be widely distributed, whereas unfavorable information has nowhere to go. If information is so distorted, then propaganda is a more fitting word than knowledge.

I believe that such distortions do occur, but not simply through the deliberate schemes of a conspiring few. Systemic distortion arises through the behaviors of ordinary people doing what is commonly expected of them within organizational systems. Such distortion is an emergent outcome, no more reducible to the intentions of the parts (individuals) than a joke is reducible to the “humor content” of the individual words that constitute it. To understand such distortion, we must examine in a new way the emergent (systemic, holistic) behaviors of organizational systems.

The large-scale organizational systems of modern society extend far beyond the capacity of individuals to grasp, much less direct and

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Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
—T. S. Eliot

**“The Big Crunch is here,”** Goodstein (1995) tells us. Criticism of universities and professors has grown (Smith 1990), and the accelerating funding that many in academia grew accustomed to is in decline. More disturbing is a growing cynicism and loss of spirit within our own ranks. Wilshire (1990) writes convincingly of the “moral collapse of the university.”

For those of us who have devoted much of our lives to universities, a radical rethinking is called for. The purpose of this article is to jolt us out of our accustomed patterns of thought so as to promote, even provoke, such rethinking.

**Knowledge and propaganda**

In his influential bestseller *Megatrends*, Robert Naisbitt (1982, p. 16) tells us:

In the information society, we have systematized the production of knowledge and amplified our brainpower. To use an industrial metaphor, we now mass-produce knowledge and this knowledge is the driving force of our economy.

Although stated bluntly, this view captures the presumptions of many people, including those now involved in the management of universities. “Industrial metaphors” are taken seriously by university administrators and critics alike. I believe that such views are shallow and deficient, even dangerously so.

by David A. Bella
control. Let us view these as CANL systems—complex, adapting, and nonlinear (Bella 1994). Within such systems, we can see much diversity, disorder, confusion, and chaos in human activities. But if we stand back so as not to be distracted by the drama in the details, we can notice patterns, much as we notice patterns in ecosystems. In general, an adaptive tendency emerges, a shifting, amid disorder, toward those patterns that, for a time, are more able to dampen rather than amplify disorders to nondisruptive levels. Of course, disruptions do arise, thus opening up the possibility for order (pattern, arrangement, form) to emerge in new ways. But, amid endemic disorder, CANL systems tend to settle into self-reinforcing patterns more able to contain disorders.

In brief, self-organization within CANL systems emerges from the continual interplay of order and disorder (Kaufman 1991, Prigogine and Stengers 1984).

Clearly, information has the capacity to either amplify or dampen disorders within organizational systems. An undistorted (unbiased) gathering of information would, of course, bring together information based on credible evidence, regardless of its capacity to amplify or dampen disorders. If, however, organizational systems do tend adaptively toward less disruptive arrangements, then a distorting tendency should be expected. Information will be shaped to sustain rather than disrupt arrangements. We should be able to observe such distorting influences within organizational systems. Moreover, if such distortions are emergent outcomes (not reducible to the parts), they would not require deliberate and intentional distortions by individuals. The whole may be more distorting than the parts.

Figure 1 sketches a common pattern of distorting relationships. The sketch refers to organizational systems with several management levels that produce, assess, and distribute information through the organized activities of many individuals. First developed in 1979 to describe the production of environmental impact assessments (Bella 1987), this sketch has since seen wider application.

To illustrate the emergent character of such distortions (not reducible to the intentions of individuals), consider a simple imagination experiment. First, read through Figure 1, winding your way both forward and backward along the arrows through the many loops of the system until you “get the picture.” Then, imagine that you have reviewed an environmental impact assessment. You find its information to be distorted to support the organizational system that produced it. You learn that unfavorable information was omitted. You are furious.

You then question the individual participants of the system. Your questions and their answers are given in Table 1. As you read the answers to these questions, keep in mind the system as a whole. Notice that, from the perspective of each participant within the system, the answers given seem reasonable. Each participant is busy with particular tasks, rushing this way and that to solve some immediate problem. The participants do not appear to be involved in deliberate efforts to distort information. They are ordinary folk much like ourselves, busy but rarely deceitful. In each of their contexts, their answers (Table 1) seem honest and reasonable. Their behaviors seem proper, similar to our own. Distortion nevertheless emerges.

Examples of systemic distortion

Examples of such distortion abound. One study (Matzke et al. 1976, pp. 36–37) that traced environmental impact assessment information through several different organizational systems found the following:

Research that has a negative effect on the project is challenged, contracted to another group of scientists, or explained away. On the other hand, favorable research is subject to no such scrutiny and in several instances purely speculative discussions are introduced that have positive conclusions based on no hint of evidence.

Hirt’s (1994) historical assessments of national forest management reveal such systemic distortions. Increased timber harvests served to increase revenue to private firms and expand budgets in public agencies. But increased harvests intensified concerns for the sustaina-
Table 1. Organizational system (Figure 1) as seen from within. (Assume that biased report has been produced by system).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person in system</th>
<th>Question addressed to person</th>
<th>Answer to question from person addressed</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher-level manager</td>
<td>Why didn’t you consider the unfavorable information your own staff produced?</td>
<td>I am not familiar with the information that you are talking about. I can assure you that my decisions were based on the best information available to me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-level manager</td>
<td>Why didn’t you pass the unfavorable information up to your superiors?</td>
<td>I cannot pass everything up to them. Based on the information available to me, it seems appropriate to have this information reevaluated and checked over.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional technologist</td>
<td>Why wasn’t the unfavorable information checked out and sent back up to your superiors?</td>
<td>That was not my job. I had other tasks to do and deadlines to meet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Troublemaker”</td>
<td>Why didn’t you follow up on the information that you presented?</td>
<td>I only worked on part of the project. I do not know how my particular information was used after I turned it in. I did my job. Even if I had all the information, which I did not, there was no way that I could stop this project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher-level manager</td>
<td>Why has the organization released such a biased report?</td>
<td>I resent your accusation! I have followed the development of this report. I have reviewed the drafts and the final copy. I know that the report cannot please everybody but, based on the information available to me, I can assure you that the report is not biased.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-level manager</td>
<td>Why has the organization released such a biased report?</td>
<td>It is not just my report! My sections of the report were based on the best information made available to me by both my superiors and subordinates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional technologist</td>
<td>Why has the organization released such a biased report?</td>
<td>It is not my report! I was involved in a portion of the studies that went into the report. I completed my tasks in the best way possible given the resources available to me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Troublemaker”</td>
<td>Why has the organization released such a biased report?</td>
<td>Do not ask me! I am not on this project anymore and I really have not kept up with the project. I turned in my report. I dealt with only a part of the project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher-level manager</td>
<td>Why was the source of unfavorable information (the “troubblemaker”) removed from the project?</td>
<td>I hardly know the person. A lot of people have worked on this project. I must, of course, make decisions to keep this organization running, but there has been no “plot” to suppress people! On the contrary, my decisions have been objectively based on the available information and the recommendations of my staff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-level manager</td>
<td>Why was the source of unfavorable information removed from the project?</td>
<td>I do not like your implications! I have got tasks to complete and deadlines to meet with limited resources. I cannot let everybody do “their own thing”; we would never finish anything. I base my recommendations and assignments on the best available information!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional technologist</td>
<td>Why was the source of unfavorable information removed from the project?</td>
<td>I am not sure about the details because I do not work with him. I guess that it had something to do with a reorganization or a new assignment. He is a bright person, somewhat of an eccentric, but I have got nothing personal against him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Troublemaker”</td>
<td>Why were you removed from the project?</td>
<td>My assignment was completed and I was assigned to another project. I do not think that anybody was deliberately out to get me. My new job is less of a hassle.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

bility of both harvest rates and ecosystem states. These growing concerns threatened to challenge higher harvest levels, which provided revenue for both private and public agencies. Information emerged to dampen such concerns while also justifying higher harvest levels and enhanced funding. In Hirt’s (1994, p. xxxii) words:

Thus a “conspiracy of optimism” developed. This was not a conscious, manipulative conspiracy of self-servers. Most foresters were well-meaning, public-spirited individuals doing what they were trained to do.

In effect, the systemic “conspiracy of optimism” claimed that resource limitations “could be avoided simply by expanding the pie” (Hirt 1994, p. 187). By claiming that resources could be expanded through “intensive management,” higher harvests could be justified, disruptions arising from conflicting demands could be avoided, budgets (to implement intensive management) could be defended, powerful interests could be served, and critics could be answered and hopefully silenced. Hirt tells us:

Foresters’ psychological investment in the efficacy of intensive management was so powerful that it filtered every assumption and perception. Furthermore, enough
science backed the faith in technological mastery over nature that foresters could assert an empirical foundation—and therefore unquestioned legitimacy—to their beliefs. But forest researchers for the most part were only asking the kinds of questions that would advance the conspiracy of optimism. Agency leaders consigned to marginality research that pointed to the flaws in the faith, or else they deferred judgment on problems until additional studies could be made. (p. 294)

A narrow, instrumentalist forestry science might be blamed, but the problem goes even deeper—to the human institutions that selectively adapted and distorted the science in pursuit of economic or political agendas. (p. xlvi)

Evidence for systemic distortion is apparent for a wide range of organizational systems—private, public, and complexes of both (Bella 1987, 1992, in press). For example, evidence indicates that the private tobacco industry long distorted assessments of the health and addiction risks of smoking even as the death toll from smoking rose to the millions (Glantz et al. 1996). Documents recently made public reveal that lawyers selected research projects for funding, shifted the language of scientific discourse on issues related to smoking and health, removed so-called deadwood documents, and brought all potentially damaging internal documents under the shield of attorney-client privilege (Bero et al. 1995, Hanauer et al. 1995). In a “Confidential for Legal Counsel Only” letter written in 1970, one of the tobacco industry’s principal outside councils described the rationale as follows:

Cigarettes have not been proved to cause any human disease. Thus, any statement by responsible and informed employees subject to contrary interpretation could only result from carelessness. (from Hanauer et al. 1995, pp. 235–236)

Reviewing the editorial changes by J. K. Wells, corporate counsel for Brown and Williamson Tobacco Corporation, of a draft paper, “The Controversy on Smoking and Health Some Facts and Anomalies,” recent investigators (Hanauer et al. 1995, p. 236) found that:

The editorial changes suggested by Wells effectively removed any reasonable presentation of the then-current state of scientific information from the paper and turned it into a purely propaganda piece.

When confronted with such evidence, industry spokespersons described the industry as the victim because the documents were stolen and undermined the confidentiality between lawyer and client (Graham 1995).

### Beyond conventional ethics

Propaganda and knowledge do overlap; the most effective propaganda hides the distinction. The selective “spin” given to information makes the difference. If such self-serving influence arose merely from individual acts of deliberate deceit, we could identify such distortions as departures from established norms. Conventional ethics serves such a purpose. But systemic distortion is not of this kind. It is a persistent and pervasive influence, shaping the norms themselves. We must therefore move beyond conventional ethics.

Consider again Figure 1 and Table 1. What behaviors allow such a distorting system to continue? Deliberate fraud is not required, although it might occur. Instead, the system depends on more common behaviors, such as rushing about to complete assignments, meet schedules, secure budgets, put out “brush fires,” and perform countless specialized tasks with limited information and resources. These behaviors are described in Table 2 as type A behaviors. A different set of behaviors, type B, is also given. Type A behaviors are responses to systemic demands, whereas type B behaviors seek out understanding. The individuals in Figure 1 and Table 1 were preoccupied with type A behaviors and gave little time to type B behaviors. Systemic distortion emerged from a persistent and pervasive shift—toward A and away from B. Those involved might affirm type B behaviors and intend to act them out. But then they tell us “I just do not have the time” as they rush off to meet type A demands.

The contrasting sets of behaviors outlined in Table 2 indicate the character of information produced by many individuals. If an interactive balance were to be found between A and B, then B would serve to correct the systemic distortions that tend to arise through A. The word knowledge might then be appropriate to describe the character of information that emerges. If, however, A dominates and B is neglected, suppressed, or selectively set aside, then the word propaganda would be fitting. In brief, we have a useful indicator, which can be stated:

Interactive balance between A and B (Table 2) indicates that “knowledge” is the more appropriate descriptor of emergent information. The dominance of A over B indicates that “propaganda” is the more appropriate descriptor.

### The university: toward a moral assessment

In his farewell address, US President Dwight Eisenhower (1961a, p. 1038) warned of a vast organizational system—the “military industrial complex.” “We must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought,” he warned; “The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.” To avoid these dangers, “to compel the proper meshing,” an “alert and knowledgeable citizenry” was essential. “I know nothing here that is possible, or useful,” Eisenhower said after his speech, “except the performance of the duties of responsible citizenship.” (Eisenhower 1961b, p. 1038)

Much has changed since Eisenhower’s warning. The cold war is over, but the power of vast organizational systems has expanded. Drucker (1994, p. 72) explains:

The old communities—family, village, parish, and so on—have all but disappeared in the knowledge society. Their place has largely been taken by the new unit of social integration, the organization.

Again, substitute the word propaganda.
Table 2. Sets of behaviors that shape the character of information. Type A behaviors are acted out by the characters of Figure 1 and Table 1. Type B behaviors are neglected and put off by the characters of Figure 1 and Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A behaviors</th>
<th>B behaviors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People are busy with countless tasks. They have little time to freely reflect, think, or discuss the meaning and consequences of their collective behaviors. “I have no time,” they tell us as they rush about.</td>
<td>People seek to understand in the most meaningful and trustworthy sense. They reflect, think, listen, speak, study, question, and search to understand and know the limitations of their understanding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time and effort, both limited, are allocated on the basis of the following kinds of questions. Will this help to:</td>
<td>Understanding is tested through questions such as:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meet requirements for approval?</td>
<td>What is the meaning?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>secure funding?</td>
<td>What are the consequences and implications?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>avoid administrative disruptions?</td>
<td>Does the evidence support this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meet schedules and deadlines?</td>
<td>Is this reasonable? Just? Trustworthy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>secure survival, favorable recognition, promotion, or reward?</td>
<td>Am I willing to stand up for this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not waste time on less pressing matters?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Such questions and their answers are guided by the system (pattern of reinforcing behaviors) through which authority, information transfer, and the allocation of resources become mutually reinforcing.</td>
<td>Such questions and the answers that arise are guided through inquiry and discourse that openly exposes claims to the review of communities worthy of trust.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over time, the content and character of information arising from the above is shaped to propagate (cause to continue, sustain) the system that guides the questions and answers.</td>
<td>Over time, the content and character of information arising from the above tends to be more trustworthy than information shaped by mere opinion or the demands of power.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**ganda for knowledge.** We areagain confronted by the question: “What makes the difference?” Eisenhower (1961b) suggested “an alert and knowledgeable citizenry.” I agree.

In a democratic society, a knowledgeable citizenry is needed to implement the difference between knowledge and propaganda so that the former rather than the latter guides society. I have suggested that the duties and responsibilities of such a citizenry include sustaining type B behaviors, particularly when these behaviors are not reinforced by the power of organizational systems. The duties and responsibilities include supporting education and sending society’s people to universities for education. Such support, however, is based on a purpose that we in higher education too often avoid or overlook. In David Goodstein’s (1995, p. 56) words:

> The purpose of American education is not to produce holders of doctoral degrees in science or in anything else. The purpose is to create knowledgeable citizens of American democracy who can contribute to their own and the common good.

Granted, universities serve other purposes. But without this essential purpose—educating and serving a knowledgeable citizenry—there would be little moral reason to sustain the notion of a university.

We now have some basis for moral evaluations of universities and those of us who profess within them. Do we ourselves credibly act out type B behaviors, or are we too busy with type A behaviors? As role models to our students, do our own actions reveal a calling to B or a preoccupation with A? Do we speak out and challenge systems when they reinforce A to the neglect and exclusion of B, or do we, like the individuals in Figure 1 and Table 1, find reasons for going along? My own assessment of the current state of affairs, after nearly 30 years as a university professor, is not favorable. Too often, despite our best intentions, we are preoccupied with A, neglect B, and experience a lack of spirit that prevents us from speaking out against the imbalance (A over B). My students see this; they call it the “plug and chug/cram and flush” approach to education.

In his farewell address, Eisenhower (1961a, p. 1038) warned about the transformation of universities:

> ...the free university, historically the fountainhead of free ideas and scientific discovery, has experienced a revolution in the conduct of research. Partly because of the huge costs involved, a Government contract becomes virtually a substitute for intellectual curiosity. For every old blackboard there are now hundreds of new electronic computers.

The prospect of domination of the Nation’s scholars by Federal employment, project allocations, and the power of money is ever present and is gravely to be regarded.

This warning is relevant today. Those behaviors (type B) that historically have made the university the fountainhead of free ideas and discovery are being given up and selectively limited to narrow inquiries, particularly those supported through outside funding. Type A behaviors threaten to dominate. Within a democratic society this situation is to be gravely regarded.

**How ought we to live?**

We sometimes get perverse satisfaction from insisting that organizations offer the only path to change. Then, when the path is blocked, we can indulge the luxury of resentment rather than seek an alternative avenue of reform and we can blame it all on external forces rather than take responsibility upon ourselves. (Palmer 1992, p. 12)

The university arose in medieval Christendom (Minogue 1973). Imag-
ine how an honorable person from that age might intelligently respond if informed of the university condition today. Such an exercise is difficult because the modern era, particularly since the seventeenth century, has well-ingrained prejudices against this earlier age. The medieval period is referred to as the “dark ages” and our own age as arising from “the enlightenment.” We have been wrongly told that medieval people believed that the earth was flat and medieval Christianity opposed science. “We are so convinced that medieval people must have been ignorant,” Russell (1991, p. 76) concludes (emphasis his), “that when the evidence is thrown in front of us we avoid it, as we might when driving swerve around an obstacle in the road.” The belief that witch hunts are medieval is, in Hollister’s (1982, p. 349) words, “a modern superstition.” We have treated this age unfairly to justify our own superiority. We might benefit from a more humble approach.

Imagine what a medieval colleague might say to us who work within universities. In our age, our practices, relationships, and behaviors follow from our knowledge and beliefs. Our medieval colleague reverses this order, and sees knowledge and beliefs as following from practices, relationships, and behaviors. For us, the key questions are: “What is our job?” and “what do we believe?” Our medieval colleague asks: “How ought we to live?” We moderns attempt to answer this question by stating our beliefs and intentions. Our medieval colleague, however, looks at our practices, relationships, and behaviors and asks “is this how you ought to live?” We reply that the word ought must be based on a system of beliefs, principles, and values. Our medieval colleague, however, claims that “ought” is revealed in our involvements—that is, we discover the meaninglessness of our ways and we are called to change. This, our medieval colleague tells us, is confession and repentance.

We are uncomfortable with such medieval notions. “Why?” our medieval colleague asks. “Are you willing to devote your lives to the type A behaviors shown in Table 1? If not, then is it so difficult to admit that you often become so caught up in these behaviors that you sense a loss, a shallowness in the way you are living? This is confession! Is it so difficult to ask, ‘is this the way we ought to live?’ Are you so helpless,” our medieval observer continues, “that you cannot change such living even when you yourself find it to be meaningless and crazy? Why should repentance, changing your ways, be such a strange notion?”

From the perspective of our medieval colleague, knowledge, belief, and values emerge from the ways people live. As we live out the type A behaviors, we devote our lives to the propagation of the systems that reinforce these behaviors. The character of the information arising from such living is better described by the word propaganda than by the word knowledge. Living out type A behaviors involves devoting our lives to the pursuit of propaganda. If this assessment sounds disturbing, our medieval colleague would say, “It should. You are called to something more.” When we point out that the system of rewards does not encourage a shift from A to B, our medieval colleague replies, “Of course. Tell me something that I don’t already know from experience.” The necessity of material sacrifice, even to the point of poverty, was accepted as necessary and welcomed, as in the lives of St. Francis and many others. “Medieval West took Francis to its heart and made him a saint,” Hollister (1982) tells us. Our medieval colleague would not be impressed by the material sacrifices that we might face, particularly those of us who have university tenure. Quoting Isaiah (55:2), our colleague might ask us, “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?”

I believe that those of us who are tenured university professors have a special responsibility in the matters raised herein. We have more opportunities than most. With respect to the question “How ought we to live?”, we tenured professors, being older than our students and junior faculty, are likely to have less of life remaining to live out a more meaningful response.

On one hand, the response sketched here—toward B and away from the dominance of A—involves real risks. We may lose summer salary, travel support to conferences, research funding, support of doctoral students, and the status and security that comes with position and recognition. We may end up teaching large undergraduate classes. We may be forced into early retirement at income levels far below our peers who were more able to gain organizational success. We may find ourselves wandering about in a social and intellectual wilderness far from the well-marked and lighted highways that provide direction and speed for their heavy traffic.

On the other hand, in this wilderness we might find something worthy of our effort and sacrifice, something worth living for. The eyes of some students may light up when we tell them of our own struggles to understand something of importance that is neither in the text nor in the objectives of granting agencies. The tradition of tenure is an invitation to take such a path. But if we wait for organizational systems to reward rather than hinder this journey, we are not likely to embark on it.

References cited


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