



The University at Buffalo scholar David Castillo:

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# 'Reality on demand' is a dangerous product made by the media market

## EXCLUSIVE



David R. Castillo is Director of the Humanities Institute at The State University of New York at Buffalo and Professor of Spanish in the department of Romance Languages and Literatures. With William Egginton, he is the coauthor of *Medialogies: Reading Reality in the Age of Inflationary Media* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016) and *What Would Cervantes Do?: Navigating Post-Truth with Spanish Baroque Literature* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022).

In your book with William Egginton, *Medialogies*, you talk about "inflationary media". What is that? And isn't inflation somehow a "natural" function of the media?

When we say that we are living in a time of inflationary media, what we mean is that the current media saturation is eroding the commons at a breathtaking pace, and with any collective sense of truth. While clearly digital media technologies came with the promise of increased connectivity, we all know now that the practical effect of their pervasiveness has been quite the opposite.

So, today, our media-saturated world is plagued by divisive, polarizing, fringe discourses, and increased feelings of disunity, isolation, depression, anxiety, the sort of doom-mentality that our media can monetize in a never ending series of apocalyptic products as well as miracle cures for our aching souls: Fundamentalisms of all kinds, ethnic, racial, religious, nationalistic. That's kind of what we mean.

So, you also talk about the concept of "reality entitlement." What's that?

Egginton and I talk about this notion of reality entitlement, and at times we call it "reality on demand". We think this is likely one of the most dangerous promises, or possibly products, of our media market. The way we'd receive our information today tends to allow us to curate our world in accordance with our own beliefs and biases. So our media feeds can be a sort of combination of diminished reality and augmented reality: A diminished reality that protects us from we don't want to see, like climate change, poverty, homelessness, social injustice, etc. And an augmented reality that reinforces our beliefs by providing us with all sorts of scapegoats, the scapegoats we may need so that we don't have to adjust to those beliefs. So I'm thinking here of notions such as, you know, the immigrants and refugees are stealing our jobs and ruining the economy, or secularists are destroying

our true values and debasing the nation, or racial minorities are taking our hard-earned tax dollars living off welfare. So, this is this is what we mean by this notion.

Somebody might say that there is a connection between reality entitlement and the entitlement to an opinion. Is there a difference between these two?

So, somebody said, "You are entitled to your own opinion, you are not entitled to your own facts." Opinions are things we need in the commons. We need to negotiate our opinions. What creates a more viable community is a discussion: The open discussion of our notions, ideas, beliefs about ourselves and the world. The problem is when my opinion tends to trump other people's opinions in an absolute way, or when I choose to surround myself with the kinds of walls can make it impossible for me to be exposed to other ideas, other opinions, other types of beliefs, and to reinforce my own opin-

ions in such a way as to make ourselves believe that we are in possession of the truth at all times.

To expose yourself to others' ideas, and to be open to negotiating whatever opinion you have formed for yourself, it has a certain labor to it. It has a certain pain to it. And some people might say, "I don't want to take that pain. I don't want to get through that pain." So why do we need to endure that kind of pain?

So more than a need to endure the pain is to understand the conditions that have created our own sense of fortified beliefs. So why do I believe certain things and not other things? What are the historical, cultural conditions of my own beliefs? The more I understand that, the more open I will be to understanding other people's beliefs. And even if I'm not interested in changing my beliefs, at least I will know what the origins of my beliefs are, so that I am aware of the contingency of those beliefs.

That's interesting. So my next question is about your observation that "Reality itself has become a consumer good." It is a frightening one. But is it just or primarily a result of the inflationary media?

That's a great question. All right. So, let's take the example of misinformation or disinformation. It is obvious that there are nefarious agents out there actively generating disinformation as a political weapon, or even as a weapon of war. However, the reason that false information of all kinds spreads four or five times faster than factual information in certain social media circles, is at least in part that this kind of disinformation makes the media giants more money. So they may think of the truth as boring, i.e., the truth cannot compete with the articulation of scandals, conspiracy theories, hatespeech, etc. In other words, misinformation can be a for-profit business in certain quarters. The algorithms that run social media sites, for example, have been designed and trained to attract more eyeballs and maximize profits using what