

How Do You Spell Populism?

Workshop on Populism and the Knowledge Gap
Friday April 14, 2016

The recent Dutch election, the election of Trump and Brexit have laid bare a new kind of divide in society. A divide by education. In the Netherlands 72% of the population has a lower education. In addition, a staggering 2.8 million of Dutch citizens are low-literate. That means 1 in 6 has trouble reading because of bad eyesight, lack of education, or lack of knowledge of the Dutch language. The 28% who are higher educated dominate the parliament, where only 5% has a lower education. This partly explains why so many Dutch voters feel unrepresented by the political elite. Those in power to govern write laws and communicate policy to citizens often using words or concepts that assume the reader has the same level of education. The UN has reported the world is increasingly divided by what is referred to as the 'knowledge gap'. Citizens who are higher educated are healthier, earn more money, and have more political power than those who are lower-educated.

As students in art education, you are in a position of privilege. You are among the 10% highest educated citizens in the country. We are used to jargon and abstract ideas used in critical discourse only a few can understand. This can lead to ideas of moral superiority towards those with a lower education, or those who do not possess the same skills in argumentation. Being more intelligent or well educated does not necessarily mean one's political judgement is better, just remember how the communist revolutions in Russia and China were supported by intellectuals around the world even though atrocities were committed by the same regimes were publicly known. The question in this workshop is if we as designers are aware of our own role in the knowledge gap, and if the tools of analysis and design we possess can help to bridge this gap.

Workshop outline

As the Sandberg is located in Amsterdam Nieuw-West, one of the lowest educated burroughs of Amsterdam, we will start the workshop with a visit to a spokesperson from the municipality. We can learn more about their experience with helping citizens that are disadvantaged by low literacy and lower education. During the workshop we will discuss how the rise of populism is linked with the gap between the higher and lower educated groups in society, and how design is linked with this knowledge gap, not just in the communication of government information, but also to a larger context of the use of difficult language, abstract concepts, and the legibility of visual languages. Working in groups, you are invited to develop visual analysis, alternative scenarios, and critical visions about the topic.

Reading

Please read [this article](#) at the Guardian by David Runciman on the role of the education gap in the election of Trump and Brexit.

Statistics for reference

- To find out more on the education of Amsterdam Nieuw-West see [here](#) (Dutch only)
- For education on national level you can find statistics [here](#) (Dutch only)
- UN report on the global 'Knowledge Divide' can be found [here](#)