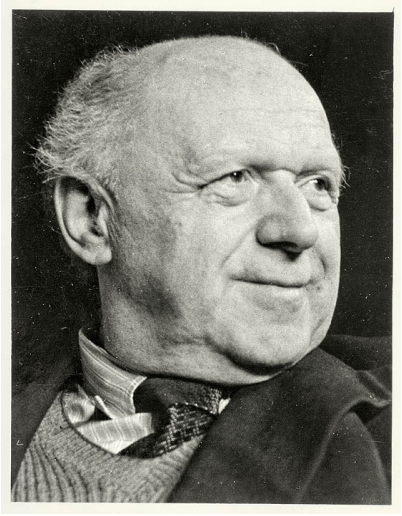
The Otto and Marie Neurath Foundation



Otto Neurath wanted people to be well informed. He was an economist, sociologist, philosopher and much more, but his most lasting work was in the field of public education. His life (1882–1945) was profoundly marked by twentieth-century totalitarianism and the two World Wars. The adversities that he experienced deepened his view of democracy as not the best, but the only form of social organization under which humankind could hope for a better future. And he saw the key to democracy in voters' ability to use facts in making their decisions.

Together with his wife Marie Neurath (née Reidemeister) and the graphic designer Gerd Arntz, he invented a revolutionary method of presenting social, economic, technological, biological and cultural information. Their system, known as ISOTYPE, used standardized symbols to represent data. "It is better to remember simplified pictures than to forget exact figures," Neurath maintained. Today we take for granted the visualization of statistics and other information in pictograms and information graphics. Fundamentally, these techniques all spring from their innovative work.

Few people would oppose the assertion that access to clean drinking water is a basic human right. In times so wracked by partisan conflict, water could be seen as a consensus issue (except, perhaps, by those who would like to privatize water supplies). We all agree: clean water should flow where it is needed, and everyone should have it. In the Digital Age, the same values should hold for information. Access to clear, understandable, reliable information is the right of every human being.

Historically, use of the expression *fake news* peaked dramatically at the onset of the Second World War. In 1939 it reached an all-time high, but only if we limit the period under consideration to the twentieth century. In the new millennium, by comparison, usage has gone off the chart. Democracy can still be challenged anywhere. No one would argue that we can look back on the twentieth century as "the good-old days." Nevertheless, those of us who grew up in the century's last decades—in its shadow, one might say—were at its end convinced that democracy was finally on the rise everywhere. This, although the number of countries worldwide whose government could be termed democratic was significantly lower than it is today. We were optimists.

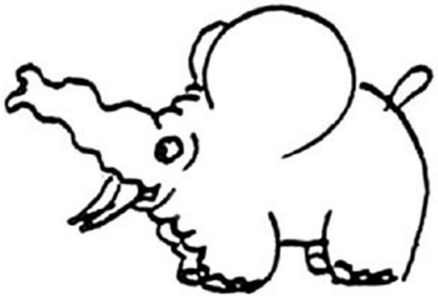
The idea of truth—like progress—has not worn well in recent years, when politicians can label facts “alternative” if they are inconvenient. And get away with it. Otto Neurath was famously averse to unfounded arguments, and particularly to metaphysics: he wanted to hear facts that could be proved or disproved. As a philosopher, he was a driving force behind the activities of the Vienna Circle, a group of academics in interwar Vienna devoted to a pragmatic, science-oriented approach to philosophy. Looking back at the twentieth century, the influence exerted by the Circle’s members in a wide range of disciplines—philosophy, mathematics, physics, economics, computer science—is truly astounding. In Vienna, these thinkers were united by their endeavor to promote the rational use of language as a sensible and reliable means of communication. The group’s work in Austria was shattered in 1938 by Nazism, which in many ways embodied precisely that which its protagonists were united against, albeit in an ivory-tower context: the Vienna Circle’s members were of a professorial mindset and little inclined toward political activism.

Except for Otto Neurath. He was of a different nature, a scholar, but political by instinct, to the point of putting his existence on the line in pursuit of his convictions. These made his life difficult. After participating as a consultant in the Munich Soviet Republic, he was tried in Germany for treason in 1919. Saved from prison by friends and colleagues who vouched for his good intentions, he was able to return to Austria, where he made major achievements in public education and public welfare in the Socialist-governed Vienna of the 1920s. Hoping to find fertile ground for his ideas in Moscow, he also began pursuing his work in the Soviet Union in 1934. Deeply disappointed by what he saw there, he was ready to return to Vienna, only to find that a change of regime—totalitarian but pre-Nazi—in his native Austria had made his return impossible. In the Hague he found a safe haven, where the ISOTYPE team could resume its activity. When Hitler invaded the Netherlands, Otto and Marie Neurath were again forced to flee, this time to England. There they were at first interned as enemy aliens. Soon, aided by his honesty and irresistible charm, Neurath was able to convince the British authorities of his commitment to victory against the Nazis. In Oxford the couple began anew their efforts in public education and public welfare. In view of the consistent success of their work, despite continual uprooting, its quality can hardly be questioned. Otto Neurath died suddenly in 1945. Marie Neurath, who as a trained mathematician had always been the mastermind behind the clarity and readability of the ISOTYPE graphics, furthered the couple’s achievements until her death in 1986.

The Otto and Marie Neurath Foundation is committed to relating their vision to the present day and putting it into practice. Facilitating public access to understandable and useful information remains the focus, with the internet being the logical mode

of transmission. To return to the water metaphor: no medium in human history has in any way approached digital technology's potential for ensuring the universal and free flow of information. Otto and Marie Neurath, however, would have been deeply dismayed by the widespread social and political erosion induced by the internet today. There is nothing wrong with the medium, but in the noncommercial service of public interest, its development is lagging. Wikipedia is a notable exception. As a not-for-profit online resource it has rendered obsolete almost every encyclopedia. The search for a comparable web-based atlas, however, yields mediocre and scattered results. Online maps are useful for navigation, but they distort the landscapes and communities they depict into little more than networks of commercial points of interest. More importantly, one should remember that an atlas can be so much more than a collection of maps, as is demonstrated brilliantly by the portfolio *Society and Economy: An Atlas of Visual Statistics* (1930). On account of the era's upheavals, this relatively early work (in German) remained the most comprehensive ISOTYPE publication.

An attempt to continue and expand upon the Neuraths' work using today's digital technology would do well to adopt the atlas (in the broader sense of the word) as its conceptual paradigm. Formally, the pragmatic simplicity of ISOTYPE would guide web design, harnessing the potential of interactive digital technology and stressing low-cost global distribution. Contentually, the online atlas would be less of a departure. "Society" and "economy" would remain logical central pillars, whereby a third and eminently necessary pillar—"ecology"—could strengthen the atlas analogy. Increased focus on environmental factors would represent a cogent updating of the historical model. While democratic stability can well be considered the overarching narrative of the twentieth century, it is already clear that environmental sustainability will be the defining issue of the twenty-first.



These notes are nothing more than a basis for discussion. Neurath experts should obviously play a key role in defining such an organization's objectives. In doing so, however, they should adhere to one basic guideline: the Foundation should not be historically oriented, rather seek to continue Otto and Marie Neurath's work in the present day.

Christopher Barber, November 2019, Vienna