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Sarah M. Stitzlein
University of New Hampshire

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From Claiming Information to Deliberating about It

SARAH M. STITZLEIN, PH.D.

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF EDUCATION AND WOMEN'S STUDIES

This paper urges students to move from consumerist and individualist models of using information to more deliberative and communal models. While its use of concepts from capitalistic markets is problematic, these descriptions are intended to get students thinking differently about how they claim and use information. This paper is meant to be provocative and to get students thinking about the way information is often used on campus and how universities provide a unique social space for developing and using knowledge differently.

It is my contention that information is increasingly viewed as something to be *claimed*, something one reaches out for and takes. Many students tend to regard information as a resource or a commodity that they quickly use to fulfill their needs. They see it readily available and believe they are entitled to use it as they desire. This consumer mentality leads to a demand for more options of information from which to choose. In much the same way that Americans walk into a grocery store expecting a huge shelf of various cereals to choose from, U.S. students expect information to be easy to locate and plentiful so that they can make choices to suit their needs. This is related to an "I'm the customer and the product should work for me" mentality. In other words, students employ the expectations of consumers accustomed to many options and service providers who meet their needs when claiming information. With this mindset, students too often latch on to information that fits with their preexisting opinions or knowledge, rather than using information gathering to expand or challenge their views, because this information fulfills their needs without requiring additional reflection on or interaction with the information obtained. In much the same way that students expect a wide array of options and yet go back to the grocery shelves for the same cereal or cereal brand that they know they already like, they turn to the same information sources to retrieve information already aligned with their beliefs and preferences because they expect that, once again, it will suit them. While they want a wide array of choices, they are prone to sticking to the same types again and again.

On many occasions, news media outlets offer the appearance of information choices about an issue or event in order to suit the expectations of readers. This phenomenon is related to a cycle of media supply and demand that can be both beneficial and harmful. Let's look at a recent example: Tiger Woods crashed his car. When a singular event like this happens, some media will respond to the event. With increased interest in that event amongst the public, the demand for more information about that event grows and the supply is increased. In this example, the public started to ask questions about an event that would be relatively mundane in the lives of most people. In response to this demand, the media began to create a feedback loop of information. For example, someone noted on a blog that Tiger had been fighting with his wife. News media then reported "some sources are speculating that Tiger was having marital problems." Hungry for more details, the media offered up story after story about Tiger and his love life. The increased supply of information does provide for multiple perspectives on an issue and viewers can often benefit by seeing the event through different lenses, here from the perspective of Tiger's neighbors, former lovers, and ultimately Tiger himself. But, simply having multiple perspectives shared through a variety of information sources does not necessarily render the information shared good. Some perspectives, especially when reporters are pressured to obtain them to promptly feed viewer demands for more information, are not always valid or equally worthwhile. Belief in the free market would suggest that eventually the faulty information would fall to the wayside, but this often does not happen quickly enough or clearly enough when students turn to online sources that are not updated or removed from the Web when debunked.

Let me begin here to move away from this consumerist paradigm. Students often seek information online when making decisions. More often than not, they just take information, rather than adding to it or engaging with others who've produced it. This may lead to two shortcomings. First, students miss out on the valuable exercise of moving from consumer of information to

producer of knowledge. Students may stay at the level of unverified or superficially verified facts, rather than engaging in a process of reflection, experiment, and critique of those facts so that they can be held more rightfully as justified true beliefs. Second, this behavior jeopardizes democratic forms of decision making. Taking information without engaging in deliberation with those who have produced it or others who are considering it risks the human interaction necessary for arriving at deliberative democratic decisions, a foundation of healthy democracy. These decisions account for the impact of information on the well-being of individuals and how its use might affect social living.

The current proliferation of information, especially in online venues, offers a terrific opportunity for improved democratic decision making. But rather than simply claiming information online, students should engage with information as they reach decisions about it. This engagement begins at the personal level by pausing to ask critical questions of the information and its source before using it as one wishes. This might entail talking with the author or looking up information about the author to determine her political affiliations, underlying motives, and other factors that might influence the information she provides. The increasing amount of information now shared on blogs and similarly constructed Web sites also increases the responsibility on the reader to fact check, as the reader can no longer rely on a publisher or editor to have done so before the piece was published online. In a related change, I believe that comments sections on news media sites have often become more actively posted and read than letters to the editor. The problem is that these comments are not regulated for libel or other shortcomings, thereby making the public deliberation surrounding them more problematic and requiring a more discerning reader. Students, responding to recent admirable efforts to fight discrimination and celebrate the individual, are increasingly prone to believe that everyone's opinion is equal. But when it comes to engaging with information in order to determine its worth, usefulness, or impact, this is certainly not the case. A KKK member may offer a less valid or morally bad comment on a Web site about the Tiger Woods situation, though he may also offer some unique insight given his (admittedly reprehensible) views on race. It's up to the student to carefully assess the quality of the comment, rather than just to claim it or discard it as she sees fit.

Engagement with information must also occur at the social level. Students should learn to be a part of knowledge production and information refinement, especially

as members of deliberative democracies. As part of living and engaging deliberative democracy, students develop civic virtues like honesty, toleration, and respect. These virtues are enacted by seeking out alternative perspectives, privileging the status of the common good, and achieving fair consensus (Pamental 1998). These capacities stand counter to or are capable of overcoming some of the pressures on information exchange to be more individualist and consumer driven. Deliberative communication, intricately connected to the work of Jurgen Habermas and the work of neopragmatists in the spirit of John Dewey, is at the heart of deliberative democracy. Within deliberative communication, each participant "takes a stand by listening, deliberating, seeking arguments, and evaluating, while at the same time there is a collective effort to find values and norms on which everyone can agree" (Englund 2006). To be active and informed participants, students need to learn how to evaluate different pieces of information. This involves critically reflecting on one's own knowledge and learning to give good reasons to support it, while simultaneously being open to learning from peers. Students, then, need to learn to listen to, appreciate, and critique the arguments of their peers. Appreciating someone else's perspective, though not simply outright endorsing it as one's equal opinion, builds empathy and an awareness of social issues effecting people different from one's self, thereby moving away from individualism and toward collective appreciation of diversity, conflict resolution, and a common (as opposed to purchased) good.

Throughout UNH coursework, a commitment to developing skills of dialogue and deliberation about information should be clear. Many of these skills entail learning to deeply engage in deliberation. In order to do so, students must master the ability to carefully listen to the ideas and arguments expressed by others, as well as the ability to craft evidence-based arguments on behalf of their own interests. They should learn how to ask insightful and respectful questions that clarify an interlocutor's perspective or request more explanation. Students must learn to identify underlying assumptions and biases as they assess the validity and worth of information. I believe this approach will lead to a more just and accurate use of information.

References

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