

Publication: Today Online

Date: 14 October 2019

Headline: In this age of easy access to information, how do we make sense of what's out there

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Educational institutions require students to test the feasibility of any ideas they generate through focus group discussions, mini trials, expert opinions, comparison with similar scenarios or other logical outcome predictors, the author notes. What protection from misinformation is there for adults?

With technology giving us unprecedented access to information, we can learn as much as we want, beyond formal education, about any issue or subject that interests us.

However, processing and assimilating new information is painful. It is much easier to just hunt for and gather fresh articulations of our entrenched beliefs.

And since this happens away from accredited education systems, there is no objective gauge when our learning is flawed. This intellectual cherry-picking is dangerous to self and society.

The common quotation “A little learning is a dang'rous thing” (Alexander Pope, 1709) warns that cursory contact with ideas deludes us that we have sufficient knowledge about a subject.

In ignoring further argument or proven facts that challenge our beliefs, we may endanger ourselves. Doubting the authenticity of others' experiences and opinions, we endanger our community.

The second danger in our hunter-gatherer approach to knowledge is that our hunting grounds are not pristine. Technology enables anybody to create and add information.

Expert information on scientific discoveries and developments in the humanities reside alongside fellow netizens' advice on slicing tomatoes and booking holidays.

Any exchange of views is beneficial only if we avail ourselves of all pertinent information before sharing our ideas. In reality, though, we often share our opinions after a hasty scan of our favourite echo chambers and forums to confirm our bias.

Publicising views without thoroughly understanding a complex situation or argument is even shamelessly validated in cyber culture by the caveat TL;DR (too long; didn't read).

Educational institutions prohibit such laxity so as to safeguard our young from believing or creating misinformed ideas. Students have to venture beyond hunting and gathering their preferred morsels of information.

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The credibility of their sources has to be established, and all germane views must be thoroughly analysed. Students know that the feasibility of any ideas they generate must be evaluated through focus group discussions, mini trials, expert opinions, comparison with similar scenarios or other logical outcome predictors.

The pedagogical aim is to cultivate skills for deep learning and meaningful construction of ideas.

WHO SETS THE STANDARDS FOR ADULTS?

What protection from misinformation is there for adults? For objective issues, authorities assert the truth about vaccines, medical treatments and other life-saving matters on multiple platforms. Danger to individual and society is addressed by countering myths and conspiracy theories with facts.

However, in complex, nuanced situations, it is much harder to keep people from acting upon ideas with weak foundations. Often the dangers are not obvious until they burst upon the community in a sorry concatenation of events.

A case in point was E-Pay's advertisement on cashless payments featuring Dennis Chew. Many were outraged at having the comedic actor portray a range of cultures and races.

It seemed as if the advertisement team were so taken with their idea that they neglected to research previous negative responses to similar portrayals of ethnicity, easily available on the Internet.

Even a little market research or focus group discussion at the planning stage on employing an actor popular only with a specific demographic would have revealed the advertisement's narrow appeal.

The strong criticism of the advertisement by siblings Preeti and Subash Nair incorporated the shocking language and style of rap genre. Again, rudimentary research by the song's producers would have shown the limited efficacy of this response to convey a complex message of deep hurt to diverse audiences.

For all parties in this episode, research for alternative views would have pre-empted upsetting the wider community. Such research is necessarily driven by empathy — a desire to anticipate and understand other positions.

Empathetic research would also have produced a finer response from some older commenters than that things were different "back in the kampung days". Why rely on knowledge gleaned in an age of limited information when so much evolved expression of individual and communal feeling and experience is available today?

A heartfelt reminder about the value of empathetic research even in a seemingly clear-cut situation emerged when singer Benjamin Kheng apologised for his depiction of the late singer Kurt Cobain in a local magazine, based on an iconic Cobain pose holding a cigarette to his mouth, suggestive of a gun.

In the light of the fact that Cobain committed suicide by gunshot, Mr Kheng's pose appeared to reference and glamourise his suicide. Mr Kheng's pose had been assigned and not styled

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by him, but he stated that had he researched into Cobain's death, he would not have adopted that pose.

In the case of the e-payment advertisement too, although the actor was not blamed, to his great credit, Mr Chew was moved to apologise for his unwitting role in offending various groups of people.

Both the above incidents highlight the value of empathetic research so as to avoid the dangers of a little knowledge.

Learning and acquiring knowledge is an arduous skill entailing a humble willingness to adapt and adopt unexpected concepts.

Today's easy access to information does not cultivate this skill. Netizens have to develop ways to benefit safely from the ever-expanding pool of information and ideas.

The 3Rs to cultivate for this method of learning are: Research any issue with intellectual empathy for unexpected complexities; Respect different feelings and views (as long as they pose no threat to life or liberty); Respond publicly only to add clarity or value to a situation or discussion.

Heeding these 3Rs will restrain us from packaging a limited opinion as collective wisdom or timeless truth. To do otherwise would be less than what we expect of children in school.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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