

A Knowledge Economy but an Ignorance Society?

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In an intriguing [2008](#) paper sociologist Sheldon Ungar asked why, in the age of “knowledge” or “information,” ignorance not only persists but seems to have increased and intensified. There’s a useful [sociological posting](#) on Ungar’s paper that this post is intended to supplement. Along with an information explosion, we also have had an ignorance explosion: Most of us are confronted to a far greater degree than our forebears with the sheer extent of what we don’t know and what we (individually and collectively) shall never know.

I forecast this development (among others) in my [1985](#) paper where I called my (then) fellow sociologists’ attention to the riches to be mined from studying how we construct the unknown, accuse others of having too much ignorance, claim ignorance for ourselves when we try to evade culpability, and so forth. I didn’t get many takers, but there’s nothing remarkable about that. Ideas seem to have a time of their own, and that paper and my [1989](#) book were a bit ahead of that time.

Instead, the master-concepts of the knowledge economy (Peter Drucker’s [1969](#) coinage) and information society (Fritz Machlup [1962](#)) were all the rage in the ‘80’s. Citizens in such societies were to become better educated and more intelligent than their forebears or their less fortunate counterparts in other societies. The evidence for this claim, however, is mixed.

On the one hand, the average IQ has been increasing in a number of countries for some time, so the kind of intelligence IQ measures has improved. On the other, we routinely receive news of apparent declines in various intellectual skills such as numeracy and literacy. On the one hand, thanks to the net, many laypeople can and do become knowledgeable about medical matters that concern them. On the other, there is ample documentation of high levels of public ignorance regarding heart disease and strokes, many of the effects of smoking or alcohol consumption, and basic medication instructions.

Likewise, again thanks to the net, people can and do become better-informed about current, especially local, events so that social media such as Twitter are redefining the nature of “news.” On the other, as Putnam ([1999](#)) grimly observed, the typical recent university graduate knows less about public affairs than did the average high school graduate in the 1940’s, “despite the proliferation of sources of information.” Indeed, according to Mark Liberman’s [2006](#) posting, the question of how ignorant Americans are has become a kind of national sport. Other countries have joined in (for instance, the [Irish](#)).

In addition to concerns about lack of knowledge, alarms frequently are raised regarding the proliferation and persistence of erroneous beliefs, often with a sub-text saying that surely in the age of information we would be rid of these. [Scott Lilienfeld](#), assistant professor of psychology and consulting editor at the [Skeptical Inquirer](#), sees the prevalence of pseudoscientific beliefs as by-products of two phenomena: the (mis)information explosion and the scientific illiteracy of the general population. From the Vancouver Sun on November 25th, an [op-ed piece](#) by Janice Kennedy had this to say:

“Mis- and disinformation, old fears and prejudices, breathtaking knowledge gaps - all share the same stage, all bathe in the same spotlight glow as thoughtful contributions and informed opinions. The Internet is the great democratizer. Everyone has a voice, and every voice can be heard. Including those that should stifle themselves... Add to these realities the presence of the radio and television talk show - hardly a new

phenomenon, but one that has exploded in popularity, thanks to our Internet-led dumbing down - and you have the perfect complement. Shockingly ignorant things are said, repeated and, magnified a millionfold by the populist momentum of cyberspace and sensationalist talk shows, accorded a credibility once unthinkable.”

Now, I want to set Ungar’s paper alongside the attributions of ignorance that people make to those who disagree with them. If you set up a Google alert for the word “ignorance” then the most common result will be just this kind of attribution: X doesn’t see things correctly (i.e., my way) because X is ignorant. Behind many such attributions is a notion widely shared by social scientists and other intellectuals of yore that there is a common stock of knowledge that all healthy, normally-functioning members of society should know. We should all not only speak the same language but also know the laws of the land, the first verse of our national anthem, that $2 + 2 = 4$, that we require oxygen to breathe, where babies come from, where we can get food, and so on and so forth.

The trouble with this notion is that the so-called information age has made it increasingly difficult for everyone to agree on what this common stock of knowledge should include while still being small enough for the typical human to absorb it all before reaching adulthood.

For instance, calculators may have made mental arithmetic unnecessary for the average citizen to “get by.” But what about the capacity to think mathematically? Being able to understand a graph, compound interest, probability and risk, or the difference between a two-fold increase in area versus in volume are not obviated by calculators. Which parts of mathematics should be part of compulsory education? This kind of question does not merely concern which bits of knowledge should be retained from what people used to know—The truly vexing problem is which bits of the *vastly larger and rapidly increasing storehouse of current knowledge* should we require everyone to know.

Ungar suggests some criteria for deciding what is important for people to know, and of course he is not the first to do so. For him, ignorance becomes a “functional deficit” when it prevents people from being able “to deal with important social, citizenship, and personal or practical issues.” Thus, sexually active people should know about safe sex and the risks involved if it isn’t practiced; sunbathers should know what a UV index is, automobile drivers should understand the relevant basic physics of motion and the workings of their vehicles, and smokers should know about the risks they take. These criteria are akin to the “[don’t die of ignorance](#)” public health and safety campaigns that began with the one on AIDS in the 1980’s.

But even these seemingly straightforward criteria soon run into difficulties. Suppose you’re considering purchasing a hybrid car such as the Prius. Is the impact of the Prius on the environment less than that of a highly fuel-efficient conventional automobile? Yes, if you consider the impact of running these two vehicles. No, if you consider the impacts from their manufacture. So how many miles (or kilometers) would you have to run each vehicle before the net impact of the conventional car exceeds that of the Prius? It turns out that the answer to that question depends on the kind of driving you’ll be doing. To figure all this out on your own is not a trivial undertaking. Even consulting experts who may have done it for you requires a reasonably high level of technological literacy, not to mention time. And yet, this laboriously informed purchasing decision is just what Ungar means by “an important social, citizenship, and personal or practical issue.” In fact, it ticks all four of those boxes.

Now imagine trying to be a well-informed citizen not only on the merits of the Prius, but the host of other issues awaiting your input such as climate change mitigation and adaptation, the situation in Afghanistan, responses to terrorism threats, the socio-economic consequences of

globalization, and so on and on. Thus, in the end Ungar has to concede that “it is impossible to produce a full-blown, stable or consensual inventory of a stock of knowledge that well-informed members should hold.” The instability of such an inventory has been a fact of life for eons (e.g., the need to know Latin in order to read nearly anything of importance vanished long ago). Likewise, the impossibility of a “full blown” inventory is not new; that became evident well before the age of information. What is new is the extraordinary difficulty in achieving consensus on even small parts of this inventory.

It has become increasingly difficult to be a well-informed citizen on a variety of important issues, and these issues are therefore difficult to discuss in general public forums, let alone dinner-table conversation. Along with the disappearance of the informed citizen, we have witnessed the disappearance of the public intellectual. What have replaced both of these are the specialist and the celebrity. We turn to specialists to tell us what to believe; we turn to celebrities to tell us what to care about.

One of Ungar’s main points is that we haven’t ended up with a knowledge society, but only a knowledge economy. The key aspects of this economy are that knowledge and information are multiplier resources, whereas interest is bounded and attention is strictly zero-sum. Public ignorance of key issues and reliance on specialists is the norm, whereas the occurrence of pockets and snippets of public widely shared knowledge becomes exceptional. Thus, we live not only in a risk society but, increasingly, in an ignorance society.