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Gaining Wisdom on the Internet

How many times have we read a headline on the Internet similar to “Don’t Fall For Fake Facebook Privacy Notice” (*mashable.com*) only after we and a half-dozen of our closest friends have already copied and pasted the fake privacy notice onto our own status updates? Unfortunately, for many, this type of situation has played out more than a time or two. Due to an increase in Internet use and decrease in personal time, the majority of what many of us read these days is online – from the news to blogs to social networking sites. Discerning accurate from inaccurate information is only part of the problem we’re facing as the trend continues towards greater increases in this technology and its utilizations. Sven Birkerts, critic, book reviewer, and author of “The Owl Has Flown,” believes that we are becoming less wise than our ancestors because we spend more of our time skimming many articles with small amounts of information and less time reading books and delving deeply into the information they contain. Birkerts contends that, rather than gaining wisdom from this shift in reading, we merely attain superficial knowledge of a variety of things, or horizontal engagement. He also criticizes the abundance of perspectives, believing they overwhelm us, destroying our ability to comprehend the whole. However, because diverse perspectives allow us to think critically, knowledge gained on the Internet can deepen our understanding and bring about revelations. Realizing that the Internet is a new world that requires new ways of thinking, in “Small Pieces Loosely Joined,” David Weinberger, a former philosophy professor, presidential campaign advisor, and writer, explains how the concepts of time, space, and obtaining knowledge in the Internet age have changed, requiring us to utilize our reasoning abilities and be more critical of our sources. A person with a solid foundation in reading comprehension and information literacy should have no problems filtering and interpreting perspectives and comprehending data found online. In “Exploring Literacy on the Internet,” Julie Coiro, a doctoral student in educational psychology, studied the effects of reading comprehension on Internet literacy and contends those who have strong reading comprehension skills are better able to extract meaning from information found online. However, she cautions that those who are taught to extract meaning from only conventional print are prone to confusion and can be overwhelmed because utilizing the Internet for learning requires additional cognitive skills. Coiro suggests it is up to educators to emphasize reading comprehension for all students, enabling them to discern reliable sources and organize ideas more cohesively. We also need to ensure students are taught the skills necessary to navigate the web in a way that minimizes distractions and maximizes understanding. When a good reader is able to filter good information from bad, manage information overload effectively, and decipher the plethora of perspectives available on the Internet, he or she is able to become more wise than those who use the Internet for recreation and convenience.

Searching for knowledge online is a seemingly simple task. Yet with so many options available, it’s difficult discerning between sources; how do we know what to believe? Understanding our online sources is critical to deciphering which information to trust, as well as interpreting their information. In “Exploring Literacy on the Internet,” Coiro addresses the benefits and difficulties associated with reading, obtaining, and comprehending knowledge on the Internet and through the growing use of digital media. Coiro explains that a new set of comprehension strategies is needed online, “[building] on traditional research and summarizing skills [involving] the abilities to search, locate, and draw connections between resources of diverse and multiple perspectives” (461). One way that we build on our traditional skills is by listening to what other Internet users have to say and drawing connections to form opinions and attain knowledge. Weinberger was able to utilize these principles in his revelation regarding how we receive knowledge online. Recalling the education he received by shopping for a quilt on *eBay*, Weinberger observed, “I learned more and learned faster listening to the voices of the quilters […] this was unsystematic and certified knowledge, but because it was wrapped in a human voice, it was richer […] and more reliable; the lively plurality of voices […] outweigh[s] the stentorian voice of the experts” (110). Through the process of shopping for a quilt and reading the listings, comments, and ratings of the sellers and bidders, Weinberger was able to learn more about quilts – and Internet life – than he had anticipated. The more time he spent listening to the voices on *eBay* and drawing connections between their words and ideas, the more he learned to discern between trustworthy listings and those that were less so. He relied on the diverse perspectives to enrich his experience.

The diversity of perspectives is one of the main features that make the Internet such an excellent environment for obtaining new information. The ideas inspired by so many different points of view add to our ability to decipher deeper meaning from what we have read. According to Coiro, “Digital texts […] provide opportunities to interact with other people using embedded tools like electronic discussion boards and synchronous chat environments that, in turn, provide exposure to multiple and diverse perspectives” (460). Some of these embedded tools are links to other websites, blogs, or pages where we can have discussions with one another and see things from another’s standpoint. This diversity helps create innovative thinking, allowing greater depth in our thought processes. In “Creating a Culture of Ideas,” Nicholas Negroponte agrees, stating, “A very heterogeneous culture[…] breeds innovation by virtue of its people, who look at everything from different viewpoints” (136). The Internet is the epitome of heterogeneity, and interacting with others on discussion boards, blogs, or even social networking sites such as Facebook allows for the opening of our minds to others’ points of view and gives us more to think about. While clicking on link after link trying to attain information on an object, a project, or researching a person or event, we are able to use the Internet’s diverse perspectives to think more innovatively or critically, and develop deeper knowledge about a subject.

Because multiple perspectives increase our understanding of what we’ve read or experienced, the expansion of our perceptual sets in turn increase vertical awareness, or deep knowledge of a subject. However, Birkerts insists this is only horizontal engagement. He claims, “[i]nundated by perspectives, by lateral vistas of information that stretch endlessly in every direction, we no longer accept the possibility of assembling a complete picture” (Birkerts 75). Birkerts believes that an abundance of perspectives is unnecessary and only spreads knowledge thin. He claims that to deepen our knowledge and experience vertical engagement, we need to read material over and over to let it bounce around in our minds. However, it’s important to recognize that added perspectives actually help form the whole picture. Coiro supports this position stating, “feedback from our peers and opportunities for sharing with real global audiences can promote higher-level thinking, communication skills, and deeper understanding of texts” (463). By understanding others’ perspectives and increasing our ability to communicate with others through the sharing of ideas, we are better able to understand what we’ve read, and comprehend more than just the words on the screen. As we gain greater insights through the diverse perspectives we experience, we learn more about a subject than what is on the surface. Rather than letting an idea bounce around our own minds and being limited by our own experiences, we can learn from the ideas bouncing around several minds and increase our understanding of, not only facts, but truths about life. Greater wisdom can be gained by learning from multiple perspectives than from just from our own interpretations.

Conversely, the diversity and multiple perspectives available on the Internet can be distracting and overwhelming. In a book, information flows from one page to the next in a very organized format, gradually deepening as we read more of the text. Online, information can be scattered about from webpage to webpage, in no particular order or format, requiring us to make sense and deeper connections from myriad sources as we click link after link. Birkerts contends that the overabundance of information is confusing and turns comprehension into a task, stating, “the explosion of data […] has all but destroyed the premise of understandability” and “[i]nstead of carrying on with the ancient project of philosophy […] we direct our energies to managing information” (75). Birkerts believes that rather than contemplating and learning from the abundance of information we receive, we are merely organizing ideas to compensate for the overload. Coiro acknowledges this can be a problem on the Internet stating, “Ironically, many Web-based environments also introduce a new set of cognitive barriers that can cause competent readers of conventional text to be cognitively overloaded and emotionally frustrated” (462). HWhen we read things only the traditional way, we are limited to only what’s in the book in front of us and what our minds are capable of comprehending from that format. Thus, when we’re given additional information that doesn’t fit into our perceptual set, it’s confusing and frustrating. However, Coiro also cites The RAND Reading Study Group’s 2002 report, which reveals that technologically proficient readers have the ability to interact with text in differing capacities and mindsets to improve comprehension online. These abilities include navigating the Internet purposefully, using cognitive skills and contextual clues in deciding which links to engage for relevant information, or discarding information based on incongruous search results. Readers who are proficient in both comprehending books and using technology are better able to navigate the Internet according to their personal requirements, decreasing their need to manage information by finding sources that deepen their understanding.

To attain wisdom, we must have a deep understanding of the truths of life. In a different time, truth was revealed through intensive reading of the only sources of knowledge people possessed – books. Over time, as technology has advanced and people’s personal time has decreased, books have given way to newspapers and magazines, and now to the Internet. Rather than spending years poring through a book to memorize every bit of information contained in its pages, we are now able to look up information within nanoseconds, and to access even more complementary information. Birkerts contends that information presented this way causes horizontal engagement. He insists that wisdom cannot be obtained through horizontal engagement, and claims, “[a] sense of the deep and natural connectedness of things is a function of vertical consciousness” (74). Birkerts defines vertical consciousness, or vertical engagement, as deep knowledge of a subject through intensive reading followed by intensive introspection. Online, if we can organize our own thoughts and observations, we can learn from a lot more than the words written on a webpage and even experience revelations. Shopping on *eBay*, Weinberger gained insight about more than just the scattered bits of information he received about quilting, such as fabrics and stitch counts. He also discovered the “disconnects between [the Web] and the real world [in terms of] space, time, self, and knowledge” (109). Weinberger observed natural connectedness, or perhaps disconnectedness, between reality and the Web. Online, space is determined by interests; time is indeterminable; self is a fluid representation of who a person is or wants to be in a moment; and knowledge comes from experiencing all of it. Weinberger’s observations are in direct conflict with Birkerts’ opinions about vertical engagement. While Weinberger did experience horizontal engagement in quilting knowledge, he simultaneously experienced vertical consciousness, or “the natural connectedness of things,” through his eBay experience. He discovered that no single perspective gives us a complete picture, but if we arrange the pieces according to our preferences and abilities, we might see more.

Weinberger reminds us that “New worlds create new people” (111). The Internet is the new world, and we can either embrace it or become cynical about the negative changes we believe result from its use. The most important aspect of utilizing the Internet effectively and allowing ourselves to be enlightened by it is to have a solid foundation in reading. Through reading comprehension, we can make ourselves information literate, ensuring that we understand how best to make use of all the embedded tools and applications we encounter online. We can utilize the diverse perspectives and applications available online to search for and verify or refute the information we’ve read, and we can use our own dispositions to judge reliability based on contextual cues, grammar, or depiction. We can open our minds to the perspectives of others to be more innovative in our own ideas, deepening our thoughts. We can utilize our time on the Internet to learn as much about a subject as we wish, and when we wish, at our own leisure. While Birkerts believes that we are becoming less wise because we spend less time reading books, he should keep in mind his own discussion of a time when it was surprising that people could read without moving their lips. Times are changing, technology is changing, and we need to change with it. If we are able to effectively interpret what we read and discriminate between accurate and inaccurate, biased and unbiased, and worthwhile and useless information, we are able to gain knowledge online and deepen our understanding of the greater meaning of things.

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