

**Serial number** 0072  
**Title** Digital Literacy and Ignorance  
**Submitter** Dr. Ibrar Bhatt, Alison MacKenzie

## Digital Literacy and Ignorance

### Abstract

Current trends in the study of digital literacy demonstrate that people largely seek out, collect, and consume information through their social media networks and online practices. Whilst such search results seem to be autonomously chosen, they are, in fact, increasingly influenced by actors like algorithms that determine what news, information and opinions are viewed.

If people are restricted in what they can know because they are unaware of exogenous actors (e.g. algorithms) and how they may guide our choices and shape our experiences, then a key issue that theorists of digital literacy must contend with is how to educate users are to be critically aware. Forms of ignorance emerging through particular digital literacy practices may result in either credibility excess or insufficient credibility to persons/authorities on the basis of their status, identity or institution, for example, or because they do not accord with views endorsed by 'chosen' social media networks.

## **Introduction**

In this paper, we examine ideas about ‘digital literacy’, particularly digital content curation, and how these relate to a study of ‘ignorance’. We draw together a number of ideas from current theories on digital literacy, particularly those related to current practices of information gathering, management and presentation, and examines these through the the epistemology of ignorance. We also present preliminary findings from a recent study of student digital literacy in Higher Education, and how students retrieve information online and make evaluative judgments about the validity and relevance of information they use and incorporate into their academic work.

## **Digital content curation**

Digital content curation describes the practices of harnessing content online, transforming it through the application of criteria which assess and promote belief, and then directs the resultant packet of filtered information to a new audience (Khan & Bhatt, forthcoming). In addition to library and media studies, online practices of curation have been examined within a number of fields including information theory (e.g. Tufte, 1990<sup>1</sup>), literacy studies (e.g. Bhatt, 2017), and computer science (e.g. Freitas and Curry, 2016). Curation is about the careful selection and presentation of artefacts, the compilation of which convey meaning and knowledge not contained in its individual pieces. In this way, curation is an act of knowledge creation, and a potentially powerful tool in the study of knowledge creation – and ignorance.

---

<sup>1</sup> Tufte does not explicitly use the term ‘curation’, but ideas contained in his work *Envisioning information* (1990) equate to curation as described here.

To be an effective curator of information, some skills are essential. These include an awareness and discernment of mediating factors, and the ability to discriminate between sources. Rheingold (2012) has dubbed this rather broad set of skills ‘crap detection’. They are critical requirements for the effective management and assessment of the troves of data available online, and also a requirement for detecting bias and misguidance in what has been called “pre-curated” data (Bhatt, 2017)—or data which has already been filtered.

Importantly, some forms of curation can create polarising ‘bubbles’ in which the only information one receives is filtered according to the practices of the users of an informational network. The resultant ‘echo chamber’ amplifies certain narratives whilst silencing others through the re-circulation of partisan information, limiting the opportunity for a person to encounter conflicting views. Such information bubbles can create protecting partitions around a worldview, and what looks like casual membership of an online community of the like-minded can end up hindering an information seeker’s ability to make fully informed decisions, endorsing affirmation bias.

Examples include Facebook friends’ lists and Twitter feeds in which disagreeable content can be eliminated through human users applying ‘unfollow’ and ‘block’ options. Similarly, algorithmically determined newsfeeds decide on the information which is presented to a user based on his/her individual habits, preferences, and usages. In both of these cases, filtered bubbles are created and maintained through a set of decisions and actions. In short, *both* are acts of curation which have the potential to aggregate people within partisan networks. The implications for how web users access information are huge: The *World Economic Forum Report*

(2013) dubbed mass-scale digital misinformation as one of the main threats to human society and modern civilization (also see O’Neil, 2016).

### **Subjective evaluation**

Curation, as epistemic work done by both humans and algorithms, becomes important from the perspective of ignorance because, among other things, subjective evaluation, editorialisation, reduction, and approximation are all inherently part of the curation process. Packets of knowledge that result from curation, whether human or computational, are therefore imbued with a certain set of determinations that should be problematised. An examination of the epistemology of ignorance is one way to do this as *not* knowing has a complex relation to the sustenance and production of knowledge practices. Ignorance may refer to an epistemically innocent absence of knowledge, such as not knowing that algorithms are often biased (see O’Neill, 2016). Ignorance may also refer to some kind of non-culpable cognitive failure on the part of the online user-knower resulting from misleading evidence or lack of knowledge about, for example, polarising filter bubbles – which is why education for digital literacy is so essential.

It is good epistemic practice to be highly selective in the things we know or seek to know in order to be epistemically functional. Epistemic ignorance has value: it is not (usually) necessary to know how many blades of grass there are in a square meter; and we surely do not (usually) need to know about the private lives of celebrities. Yet, ignorance may represent a blameworthy failure to put effort or skill into knowing something one ought to know.

Educational managers who rely on algorithmic assessments to assess teacher impact on student

progress are surely culpable for knowing that these are very narrow and simplistic forms of assessment that have far reaching consequences for how we judge what constitutes effective education.

If people are restricted in what they can know because they are unaware of exogenous actors (e.g. algorithms), and how they may guide our choices and shape our experiences, then a key issue with which theorists of digital literacy must contend is how to educate users to be critically aware. Forms of ignorance emerging through particular digital literacy practices may result in either *credibility excess* or *insufficient credibility* to persons/authorities on the basis on their status, identity or institution, for example, or because they do not accord with views endorsed by their 'chosen' social media networks.

## **Conclusion**

We argue that a critical approach to digital literacy is particularly important in learning environments where students are accorded different amounts of autonomy in how they carry out their academic work. It is also pressing in light of research which finds that student web users are failing to sufficiently differentiate between sources of online information based on reliability (e.g. Stanford History Education Group, 2016). In each of these cases it is important to examine how ignorance is developed and sustained through particular kinds of digital 'literacy' practices.

We conclude by invoking the trope of museum curators as *stewards* of information and reliable producers of knowledge historically, and suggest that such stewardship is just as

pressing and relevant today in online environments for individuals, institutions and governments, for the prudent and transparent management of abundant information.

## References

Bhatt, I. (2017) *Assignments as controversies: Digital literacy and writing in classroom practice*, NY: Routledge.

Khan, S. & Bhatt, I. (forthcoming) 'Curation', chapter in Hobbes, R. & Mihailidis, P. (Eds.) *The International Encyclopedia of Media Literacy*, NY: Wiley.

Fritas, A. & Curry, E. (2016) 'Big data curation', chapter in *New horizons for a data-driven economy* (pp. 87-118), Springer International Publishing.

O'Neil, C. (2016) *Weapons of math destruction: How big data increases inequality and threatens democracy*, New York: Crown.

Rheingold, H. (2012) *Net smart: How to thrive online*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Stanford History Education Group (2016) *Evaluating information: The cornerstone of civic online reasoning* (Executive Summary Report). Retrieved March 15, 2017, from <http://sheg.stanford.edu/upload/V3LessonPlans/Executive%20Summary%2011.21.16.pdf>

World Economic Forum (2013) *Digital wildfires in a hyperconnected world*. Global Risks 2013: An Initiative of the Risk Response Network. Geneva. Retrieved March 15, 2017 from <http://reports.weforum.org/global-risks-2013/risk-case-1/digital-wildfires-in-a-hyperconnected-world/>.