

The Most Noble Gas

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If information were an element, its natural state would be a gas. Information is constantly expanding in an attempt to fill the container that is society, and the more exciting the information is the faster it expands. It is unlikely that this process could ever be stopped and even more unlikely that it could be reversed. It is in human nature to communicate and share one's ideas with those around him. Thus we have continually developed new technologies to fulfill this need for communication. With the invention of each new form of communication, from the founding of postal services to the invention of the telegraph and then the telephone, it has become increasingly easier for information to be spread. Now, with the advent of the Internet, one person is able to share his thoughts with billions of people in no longer than the time it takes to hit the Enter button on his keyboard. Humanity has entered into a level of connectedness never before possible. And from this connectedness stem two significant questions. On the one hand, should information be freely available to any who seek it? And on the other hand, what responsibilities fall onto a society in which technology has allowed the aforementioned availability?

In answer to the first question, information should be readily available to whoever seeks it. Information, and the knowledge that can be gained from it, is not the private property of one person, but rather a treasure belonging to all mankind. Of course that is not to suggest that anyone has a right to appropriate the original work and ideas of others so as to pass them off as their own and reap any potential benefits. Patents and copyright laws play a significant role in mature societies and respecting them allows for proper credit to be given where it is deserved. What it means to say that knowledge belongs, and should be accessible, to all is that without an efficient means of spreading knowledge and ideas there could be no further progress within

society. We advance as a civilization by continually studying and reevaluating the knowledge and information gathered throughout history. There are few, if any, truly original ideas produced at this point. What is new is the way in which existing ideas are combined and interpreted.

Thomas Kuhn, the noted historian and philosopher of science, explains that science operates in this way when he says, “Each new scientific theory preserves a hard core of the knowledge provided by its predecessor and adds to it.”¹ It is for this reason that it is so imperative that information be available to those who can make use of it. However, the free availability of information does more than aid academics working in the arts and sciences.

The free availability and efficient dissemination of information is equally imperative to the successful functioning of the modern nation. Authoritarian regimes are notorious not only for their self-serving dictators and tendency to severely punish dissent, but also for the extent to which they censor the information available to their citizens. It is much easier to convince your constituents that you are their best hope for prosperity if you can prevent your opponents and the media from exposing evidence proving that you embezzled state funds and tortured political prisoners. Only by having access to all pertinent information can citizens make responsible choices when it comes to their government and its leaders. It is with that ideal in mind that the Founding Fathers included in the Constitution of the United States the First Amendment, which prohibits the government from “abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press...”² It was recognized in 1791, as it is now, that a democratic government can only truly represent the people if there can be a means of exchanging and debating ideas among the people. From this follows the right of the citizenry to be informed of the actions and policies undertaken by its

1. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Copernican Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 3.

2. U.S. Constitution, amendment 1.

government. Thus, a government must operate under a policy of transparency except in those instances where the citizens have willingly and knowingly delegated decision making responsibilities to their elected representatives.

Ultimately, as the infamous website WikiLeaks and its director Julian Assange have made clear, if there is a means by which information can be spread it will do so. And it is for that reason that the more important question concerning the spread of information is not whether information should be disseminated, but rather how must society react in response to the dissemination? Certainly there are many dangers associated with how easily one can obtain any information he might be interested in. The Internet provides a forum for extremists to buy, sell, and develop weapons to use in acts of terror. With little more than a basic understanding of computers a thief can obtain a victim's personal information and steal his identity. The potential dangers associated with so easily accessed information make it more important than ever for people and nations to resolve their differences as quickly and peacefully as possible. While much of human history has seen technology be shaped by society, it is now the case that society must be shaped by the technology that it has created.

We must, as a national and international community, learn to become critical consumers when it comes to information. When a historian conducts research for a particular project he looks not only at the information presented by a given source, but just as importantly at the credentials of that source. The historian knows that a paper written by a scholar with twenty years of experience concerning the topic at hand will be exponentially more reliable than an article on a website that allows anyone to contribute. And although it may not be necessary for the average person to be quite as critical as a professional academic when searching for information on a topic of interest to them, the principle still applies. On any given topic one can

surely find dozens, if not hundreds, of Internet sources claiming to provide a complete explanation of that topic. The only way to uncover the truth, or at least the best possible approximation thereof, is to critically examine the information presented based on a number of criteria: who the author is, with what or whom he is affiliated, and what the author is attempting to achieve by presenting the information. By increasing the standards by which we judge the information we receive, we increase the quality of the information that is disseminated. Thus it becomes easier to locate and utilize the information that one is searching for.

It is equally important however that those producing and disseminating information reevaluate their standards as well. Although it is true that everyone has a right to the knowledge humanity has produced throughout history that does not mean that everyone needs to know everything. For instance, there is absolutely no need for one to place schematics for an explosive device on an open webpage. If there is anyone who has a legal and/or professional need for such a device (a commercial demolition contractor, perhaps), he will have contacts available through his profession that will allow him to obtain the information that he needs. Nor are the Internet and other public forms of communication meant to be pulpits from which polemics can instigate confrontation with those they perceive as enemies. Unfortunately such has become the case because our society has chosen to place drama and unproductive bickering above constructive dialogue.

That is the most significant change we must make. There will always be a time and place for the exchange of information that is meant purely as entertainment. But we, as a society, must learn to take seriously the tools that we now have before us. We must come to understand that if we are to maintain and expand the level of information proliferation, we must accept the responsibilities that such proliferation entails. We must not tolerate the dissemination of

information that is intended solely to create division and tension. We must protect the rights of those who risk their safety to call attention to oppression and other grievous wrongs. We must promote the free and honest dialogue between those who wish to share their information in order to improve society.

Bibliography

Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Copernican Revolution*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957.