

Riding The Information Wave

by

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Mike Wise, a sports journalist for the Washington Post, made a serious mistake last year. In addition to writing for the Post, Mr. Wise also appears on a radio program and releases information through his tweet account. One day Mr. Wise was on the radio deriding bloggers for posting poorly sourced and wrong information. You do not have to be a professional journalist to understand the frustration of competing with blogs that often post rumors as fact. To prove his point he set a trap for the bloggers. He started a rumor by tweeting a false story. He wanted his listeners to watch how fast it went up on the blogs without being fact checked.

On the one hand, he proved his point. The false story was posted quickly on several blogs, as fact. On the other hand, Mr. Wise's tweet account identifies him as a professional reporter working for the Post. His tweets are held to the same standards as his articles and, therefore, his tweets should be reliable information. He had fell into a trap of his own making.

The source of Mike Wise's mistake comes from switching between different media and information sources. Just as the ethical and accuracy standards are different for journalists and bloggers, so are the behavior standards for journalists and radio personalities. Swimming through the shifting sea of our media and information is becoming more confusing. Without a strategy in place even the professionals can become lost.

Everyday we are bombarded with information that comes from different authors and organizations, each with different motivations and ethical standards. The ability to quickly determine both its reliability and usefulness is becoming an essential skill in our modern society. Yet, knowing this, we rarely take active steps to prepare ourselves for this new environment. We often mistake technical skill for competence, just as we mistake multitasking for time management. Instead of harnessing the artifacts of the information age such as the laptop, iPod

and cellphone, we are trapped by text messages, emails and cellphones. If the modern information environment can confuse a professional such as Mike Wise, then we should focus more on digital media literacy and coping mechanisms in our education systems. Our goal is to fully utilize the power of the information age and use it to develop our selves to our true potential. To do this we must as individuals and as a society make intelligent decisions regarding media use.

When I was in middle school our social studies teacher showed the class pictures of people's feet. Some of the people had grown up wearing shoes and some had grown up barefoot. People who grew up barefoot had wider, stronger feet. When we grow up wearing shoes our feet are narrow, and not as muscled. Looking at the pictures one could easily sort the shoe wearers from the non-shoe wearers. This is not the only example of how technology has physically changed us. Dr. Gary Small of UCLA has found a similar physical change resulting from use of Internet search engines. Dr. Small used an MRI to study how internet use changes the function of our brains. By comparing images of people who were Internet savvy to those of Internet novices he found that the two groups used their brains differently. Internet savvy people had strengthened a section of their brain that aids in decision making and sorting complex information. Furthermore, Internet novices underwent significant rewiring of their own brain after only five hours of Internet exposure. Looking at the pictures, Dr. Small could easily sort the Internet-users from non-users.

As our brains change, our relationship with information also changes. In his book, *Grown Up Digital*, Don Tapscott writes about the changing model of learning. The old model was to store as much information as you could in your head. However, under the new model, "a well-educated person is... one who knows where to find what he needs when he needs it." If this is the case then our educational models need to change from an emphasis on memorization to one of source assessment and evaluation. As we become more dependent on the Internet for our information we need to become better at determining the value of that information.

Wikipedia serves as an example of our evolving relationship to information. As a society we are currently deciding what Wikipedia's place in the classroom should be. Many teachers fight hard against the use of the free online encyclopedia. Chief among their concerns is that the encyclopedia is written and edited by amateurs. This goes against the grain of everything they were taught. When one needs information one should consult the literature produced by the experts. Surprisingly though, studies show that once articles stabilize they rival traditional encyclopedias for accuracy. In her article, *Mediating at the Student-Wikipedia Intersection*, Angela Rand discusses Wikipedia's accuracy and how clever educators are turning this problem into a teaching opportunity. Recognizing the futility of condemning Wikipedia they instead promote a more intelligent, active use. Some teachers charge their students with finding and removing mistakes from Wikipedia while others require students to author new articles. Not only does this teaching style develop critical thinking, writing and editing skills, it also encourages a more mature relationship between the information source and information consumer. This is important because frequent Internet users begin to think of online information as an extension of themselves.

If we can quickly access information on our laptops then should we still bother with memorization? Currently educators ponder the usefulness of exercises such as elementary students standing in front of the class and reciting the Gettysburg Address. In her article, *Revisioning Information Literacy for Lifelong Meaning*, Dane Ward uses Beethoven's Seventh Symphony as an example of how we should approach information literacy. She argues that it is not enough to be able to access and analyze the piece. "...he expected us to be affected and transformed by it." This requires a change in ourselves, the development of a personal relationship with that information. In the age of Google and Wikipedia few teachers are going to require students to memorize a list such as the countries of South America. But what kind of information should be a part of us? Speaking for myself, I feel that having a personal relationship with the Gettysburg Address has made me a better person, and has given me a

deeper understanding of American History. In our discussions about information literacy it is important to remember that we are not computers: we do not download, we learn. That is why we are able to produce as well as consume information.

As the barriers between information producers and consumers are eliminated, people increasingly develop a more personal relationship with the technical source. Consider Alva Noe's essay, *Japanese Teenagers Teach us Something About Being In Two Places At Once*, on the NPR blog 13.7. In this essay Noe discusses a study of text messaging behavior. People who do not text friends have trouble understanding why teenagers text one another so often. The information being sent is not important. The conclusion of the study is that most texting is not about conveying information but making your presence felt by your friends, in spite of physical separation. When friends text back, you feel their presence. Regardless of different schedules, commuting distance, and physical barriers, teens can 'be' together continuously. The technology becomes not only an extension of themselves but also of their friends.

This begs an important question. If texting becomes an extension of your friends who are accustomed to constant contact, and online information sources become an extension of your knowledge, on top of which you are communicating by email and operating in the physical world, how can you avoid multitasking? More and more of us are attempting to multitask our way through our day. Dr. Clifford Nass of Stanford University studies the effects of multitasking on performance. He finds that there is a real disconnect between how we feel about our multitasking ability and our actual performance. Almost everyone feels they are being extremely productive by performing two, three or more tasks at once. However, testing reveals that when multitasking we are prone to making simple mistakes and wasting a lot of time. Dr. Nass' college age subjects would make mistakes sorting vowels from consonants, and odd from even numbers. A separate study at Microsoft revealed that when interrupted it would take an average of fifteen minutes for employees to get back on task. As the sources of information increase, so is the potential for distraction.

The long-term effect of this multitasking seems to be a form of self-induced attention deficit disorder. People who spend hours every day multitasking develop problems concentrating on one thing for extended periods of time. As brain tries to rewire itself to handle constant multitasking, we are less likely to engage in activities like reading a book. We only feel productive when multitasking. Ironically, many of us are wasting hours everyday while, feeling busier than ever. Again, without a strategy in place even the brightest of us can become lost.

South Korea seems to be ahead of America in feeling the effects of the information age. Correspondingly, they are also ahead of us in trying to develop strategies to help their people adjust to the new environment. For example, in South Korea the Internet and video games are recognized to have addictive properties. Programs are set up to help parents and their children deal with the fallout of poor choices. Public schools are training elementary students about proper Internet use and etiquette.

The coming of the information age is comparable to the invention of the printing press. As the printing press did, the information age is reinventing our society. The printing press allowed the wide and cheap distribution of scientific knowledge, literature, scholarly thought and religious text. It encouraged learning and development. As if to balance this it also contributed to the split of Christianity, which plunged Europe into a century of warfare. Decisions that societies made regarding the printing press affected them for centuries to come.

The information age is improving our lives and affording greater opportunity to develop as human beings. We have more information at our fingertips than at any other time in history. It is easier than ever to communicate, across cultures and distance. Our creativity is being unleashed. For example, one of the reasons Steven Spielberg became a movie director is because his parents bought him a Hi-8 film camera and film. This allowed him to make movies in his back yard. It stands to reason that anyone who grows up with a movie camera in their hands will be more comfortable expressing themselves creatively. Today, everyone is growing up with a camera in their hands.

The most important difference between the printing press and the information age is the speed of change. Our society is being transformed within the space of a generation. We do not have a lot of time to adapt to the changes and develop our strategies.

Years ago, we were taught to distinguish between fact and opinion. We were cautioned not believe everything we read. We learned to find a quiet place to read and concentrate. We were made to do our homework before we went out to play. As a society we believed these skills were essential to success and a healthy life. For some reason we abandoned these good habits in the face of digital media. Sadly, young people today are not being taught these strategies at all. It is true that the world has changed very rapidly, but this is even more reason to encourage a thoughtful approach to developing skills such as time management, questioning information sources and developing healthy living habits. The decisions we make now will become part of our culture. Making good decisions and developing healthy habits in the modern age will mean the difference between dog paddling in the Internet wash and riding the information wave.

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