

INFORMATION PLEASE!

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information? T.S. Eliot

In truth we know nothing, for truth lies in the depth. Democritus

*O world invisible, we view thee,
O world intangible, we touch thee,
O world unknowable, we know thee.
Francis Thompson*

*In a time of turbulence and change, it is more true than ever that knowledge is power.
J.F. Kennedy*

Attendance at Professor Smith's classes was nearly always around 100%. Students vied to enroll in his course. He had more of them than any other academic. It was not because the students found him that interesting. It was because he never failed anyone. Also never setting any exams made him a very popular member of the faculty. His was, by far the easiest course the university offered. All one had to do was show up for lectures. He was very meticulous about keeping an attendance record thus providing an excellent motive for the students to appear at his classes. He also insisted that they show interest in what he was saying. Such attention, even if it was false, provided him with some ego satisfaction. Efforts to remove him always failed. He was just too popular.

As an anthropologist, Professor Smith's specialty was information. He was totally absorbed in its creation, storage, communication and impact. Actually, one would be hard pressed to think of any other relevant parameters. He had become interested in this topic during his student years and had spent his professional career in related research. Neither his faculty peers nor his students shared his enthusiasm for 'information'. He was considered somewhat eccentric by both. Professor Smith was not a good communicator and came across as a pedantic, boring and unimaginative lecturer and orator.

Despite these handicaps, there were two personages who shared his zeal for information, so much so, that they became his acolytes and disciples. The younger, Andrew Jones was the good professor's doctoral student. The other, Dr. Harry Porter, a psychologist, was a fellow academic. Three times a week they met to discuss anything new or anything that one of them had dreamt up. Notwithstanding Professor Smith's longstanding work in the field, he had never really contributed anything of real value to his so-called area of expertise probably because of his lack of imagination. He oversaw the research and served as the group's historian. His memory was quite extraordinary so that his contributions were actually quite valuable: he ensured that any of their endeavors were original. However Jones and Porter were the real researchers. While most of their forays into information had never led to anything worthwhile, they were the ones with the innovative ideas, something Professor Smith acknowledged and valued. While he had an ego, luckily he had no interest in fame or fortune. Only the subject mattered.

It was at one of their sessions that something was raised that appeared prosaic but later led to extraordinary uncharted waters. On this occasion it was Dr. Porter who first broached the idea.

“We have been examining ‘information’ exhaustively, or so we think, but have never really come up with a novel idea. Further, while the word is very common, I am not sure we or anyone else really understand what the term means. We seem to be able to recognize information when we are in its presence but its definition eludes us. We know that information is not unique to humanity. However for the sake of keeping our inquiry manageable let us restrict our conjectures to the relationship of humans with it. Again while we have often delved into the role of technology, it has been a rather superficial examination. Perhaps we should try a new tack. If one thinks about it, there is a requisite link between the two. Information, as we understand it, cannot have an independent existence apart from technology.”

Excitedly, Jones interjected.

“You are absolutely correct. We should have studied the evolution of information with respect to technology. Professor Smith, please correct me if I am wrong from a historical point of view. For example, the earliest form of information storage was simply the human memory while its communication was carried out by gesticulations and/or by grunts or non-linguistic sounds. The next important step was possibly the depiction of information by painting or etching on cave walls. In parallel, probably came the development of language followed by its representation as writing. This enabled us to both communicate and store information far more efficiently and accurately than ever before. With the invention of the printing press, communication and storage of information were enhanced by many orders of magnitude. Systematic libraries were established allowing for storage of huge amounts of information and for its relative easy retrieval. Since we are rather familiar with what followed we need not go into a detailed account. Suffice to say we now have the means to store tremendously large amounts of information, both textual and graphic, in disks the size of one’s palm, and getting exponentially smaller. We are also able to retrieve this information at unimaginable speeds and communicate it at the speed of light. It might be possible to surpass this velocity by using space warps or quantum wave mechanics. Further, we are at a threshold of utilizing biochemical molecules that can store much more data than the silicon chip currently in use and lead to unforeseen possibilities that are usually the domain of science fiction.”

Breaking the silence that ensued, Professor Smith made, what was for him, a startling conjecture.

“If we take these thoughts to a logical conclusion, we may be looking at information in a radically different manner. If its storage can be reduced to the molecular level, why not to the atomic, or for that matter the subatomic levels? Indeed if matter and energy are two aspects of the same thing why not to quanta or photons of energy?”

Dr. Porter was next to include his observations.

“Let us take it to another level. If all information can be concentrated into matter and energy, it behooves us to believe that everything that exists is nothing more than information in one form or another. Existence itself is therefore information in all its

various forms and we are nothing more than a walking combined totality of small packets of information each dependant upon the others. It appears that the sum of these packets is more imperfect than each of the individual ones.”

Again, after a few minutes of silent contemplation and somewhat somberly, Professor Smith, once again interjected.

“While I appreciate that it is impossible to understand the why of existence, I can accept that all existence is a manifestation of information. However what is difficult to understand is why so much of it, if not all of it, is tainted and distorted. While the fundamentals of humanity, that is the basic cell structures that together comprise the human being, may have a much higher degree of certitude, the total human being espouses beliefs rife with biased opinions and downright falsehoods. Even at the atomic and quantum levels we are faced with much uncertainty as evinced by Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle. Our most cherished system of thought, namely Mathematics has been shown by Godell’s Theorem to have feet of clay. In other words, while everything is information, it is all so tainted that we never know what is true or false or how much truth any assertion of anything contains. What complicates things even further is the massive amounts of information both useful and spurious, that we are bombarded with. There is an old adage that seems pertinent. ‘In all lies there is some truth and in all truth some falsehoods.’ It is as if the designer of existence, if there is one, decided to have some fun at our expense and see how we would manage in an infinity of imperfections that included us.”

After about another few cups of coffee during which time nothing was said, the group sadly arose. Each wondered whether they would ever meet again since the reason for these get-togethers had simply disappeared. Dr. Porter with a dazed look on his face made his final comment.

“I am totally at sea. I feel that I need the help of a member of my profession. This is because a close examination of our discourse reveals a litany of contradictions. Isn’t ‘information’ a human concept and all its forms a human construct or does it exist independently of us? Quantum Mechanics tells us that everything in the universe is connected to everything else. If this is so doesn’t that mean that we are connected to everything else and that we are all aspects of a form of information? This begs the old question as to whether ‘truth’ is discovered or invented. We have come to realize that all information is tainted. Is this so because we are? Did we contaminate existence or were we polluted by it? What about the certainty of uncertainty? Is this not an enigmatic contradiction? Finally, do we exist or are we nothing more than figments of something or somebody’s imagination masquerading as information? Help!”

Dr. Smith was then heard to utter the last word.

“Perhaps it is all due to the real ‘Original Sin’, that is the first one, the sin of eating from the tree of knowledge.”

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