

Information, knowledge & wisdom

I define knowledge as organised information – information that is embedded in some context; information that has a point of view, that leads one to seek further information in order to understand something about the world. Without organised information, we may know something of the world, but very little about it. Perhaps I can say it best this way: When one has knowledge, one knows how to make sense of information, knows how to relate information to one's life, and, especially, knows when information is irrelevant.

Now, it is fairly obvious that newspaper editors are aware of the distinction between information and knowledge. Not all of them, of course. There are newspapers that still appear to be in the information business rather than the knowledge business; which is to say, there are editors who do not yet grasp that in a technological world, information is a problem, not a solution. They will tell us of things we already know about and will give little or no space to providing a sense of context or coherence.

A newspaper that does not do this is useless to me. It is worse than useless. It contributes incoherence and confusion to a mind that is already overloaded with information.

The worst thing about television news or information on the Internet is precisely that there is no point of view, no sense of what the audience is supposed to do with the information. Television, radio, and the Internet are media for information junkies. Newspapers must do something else.

You know as well as I that if you tell me a story, you must also tell me, in one way or another, why you are telling me the story.

That is what I mean by being in the knowledge business. But there is something else you must do for me in a technological age, and this brings me to the idea that I have to offer and which may strike you as strange.

The idea concerns the word wisdom. I wish to suggest that it is time for newspapers to begin thinking of themselves as not merely being in the knowledge business but in the wisdom business, as well.

On hearing this word, wisdom, you may be inclined to think I am going too far. But I wish to define it in a way that will make it seem to you entirely practical. I mean by wisdom the capacity to know what body of knowledge is relevant to the solution of significant problems. Knowledge, as I have said, is only organised information. It is self-contained, confined to a single system of information about the world. One can have a great deal of knowledge about the world but entirely lack wisdom. That is frequently the case with scientists, politicians, entrepreneurs, academics and even theologians. I suppose it is also true of editors.

For example, let us say, you have a story about cloning. It is mere information to tell us that scientists in Scotland have cloned a monkey. You will provide us with knowledge if you can tell us how cloning is done, and how soon we may expect humans to be cloned, and even something about the history of attempts at cloning. But it would be wisdom to advise us on what system of knowledge we need in order to evaluate the act of cloning.

Science itself can give us no help in this matter. Science can

only tell us how it works. What can tell us whether or not we should be happy or sad about this? What can tell us if there are policies that need to be developed to control such a process? What can tell us if this is progress or regress?

To begin to think about such questions, we would probably have to make reference to the body of knowledge we call religion, or the body of knowledge we call politics, or the body of knowledge we call sociology. Knowledge cannot judge itself. Knowledge must be judged by other knowledge, and therein lies the essence of wisdom.

There are, I have learned, children starving in Somalia. What system of knowledge do I need to know in order to have some idea about how to solve this problem? I have learned that our oceans are polluted and the rain forests are being depleted. What systems of knowledge do I need to have to know how these problems might be solved? Or the problems of racism and sexism? Or the problem of crime?

If you are thinking that this sort of thing is accomplished on the editorial page, I say it is not. Editorials merely tell us what to think. I am talking about telling us how we should think. That is the difference between mere opinion and wisdom. It is also the difference between dogmatism and education. Any fool can have an opinion; to know what one needs to know to have an opinion is wisdom; which is another way of saying that wisdom means knowing what questions to ask about knowledge.

Wisdom does not imply having the right answers. It implies only asking the right questions. If Bill Gates were a speaker at your conference, and you were given a chance to ask him questions, what would you ask? What his latest project is? How does his software work? How much money will he make? What mergers he is planning? Well, I would probably ask him the same questions because, in fact, judging from his book *The Road Ahead*, Bill Gates may be the last person likely to have answers to the moral, psychological, and social questions that need to be asked about computer technology. Who would you want to interview about that and what would you ask?

I am reminded here of who was interviewed by journalists during the US-Iraqi War. On television, radio and the press, generals, experts on weapons systems and Pentagon officials dominated. No artists were interviewed. No historians, no novelists, no theologians, no school teachers, no doctors. Is war only the business of military experts? Is what they have to say about war the only perspective citizens need to have? I should think that weapons systems experts would be the last people to be interviewed on the matter of war. Perhaps the absence of any others may be accounted for by saying the first casualty of war is wisdom.

I can envision a future in which what I have been saying about wisdom will be commonplace in newspapers. I cannot envision exactly how this will be done, although I rather like imagining a time when, in addition to op-ed pages, we will have "wisdom pages", filled with relevant questions about the stories that have been covered, questions directed at those who offer different bodies of knowledge from those which the stories themselves confront.

I can even imagine a time when the news will be organised, not according to the standard format of local, regional and world news, but according to some other organising principle – for example, the seven deadly sins – greed, lust, envy, pride, gluttony, and so on. If that would ever happen, I would imagine stories about Bill Gates would fall into every category.

The way I see it is that reporters convert facts to information. Editors convert information to knowledge. And great editors convert knowledge into wisdom.

While there is an abundance of information, there is a shortage of knowledge, says NEIL POSTMAN, from New York University, in this excerpt from a speech to the World Editors' Forum in Amsterdam in June.