

Information equity, information quality and information rights: some observations

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It is commonly acknowledged that ours is an information-rich environment for a significant minority of people. The nature, value and validity of that information are seldom matters for consideration. Further, it is generally acknowledged that we all live in an 'information age', and we are persuaded that this is universally beneficial. However, information is not such a simply defined good as, say, aspirin or penicillin. The cheese that we eat is a purer, more carefully manufactured and monitored commodity than the information that we all receive and pay for, directly and indirectly. 'Information' is a highly variable, occasionally toxic product.

Debate in contemporary Australian society is astonishingly rich in information, much of which is redolent of paradox and contradiction. There is no Australian Standard Specification for information. There is nothing new in this, and those who would gain access to your ear, your eye, your purse or your vote are adept at exploiting the opportunities on offer.

Opposition, contrariety, propaganda, advertising, disinformation, information, half-truths, half-lies, whole lies, shock-jocks, secret commissions, insider trading, 'my government will ...', 'the Opposition said today...': the whole lot, schlock and barrel of the current intellectual, social, economic and political canvas has paradox as its warp and contradiction as its weft. And its common thread is information. Of a kind.

The daily information diet that we all ingest, willy-nilly, carries on its packaging no health warnings, no nutritional analyses, no advice re genetically modified content. Few of us are trained to discriminate, evaluate, weigh or judge it; instead, we process the incessant and overwhelming information output in the light of individual prejudice, coloured by our personal histories, which in this country are now so various and disparate as to reflect almost nothing by way of a shared, general or sustained cultural foundation that might provide a common platform from which to evaluate the daily deluge.

Volatility ensues and the massaging of information assumes the stature of an art form. Truth, history, information and long-held beliefs prove to be entirely malleable or corruptible against the context of a global economy that has no common culture or shared belief other than a subscription to the unfettered generation of wealth for an increasingly small minority of nations and, within each of these, of individuals.

Which is perhaps why the extraordinary media reaction (and here, I know, I tread on sacred ground) to the death of a cricketer was so quickly to sweep across the country and reach even our tiny rural post office in south-east Tasmania with its (how long pre-printed?) condolence books. Bradman was an Australian hero — no doubt about it — but heroism of varying kinds, often in-

volving incomparably greater levels of personal sacrifice, discomfort and altruism, is commonplace, and goes unnoticed.

Bradman was, during his active sporting life, a 'natural' (as distinct from a fabricated) hero, and after this, the most private and self-effacing of men: but on his death, his life became a public artefact with potential economic attributes. I suggest that this occurred partly because those with a stake in the Bradman industry (and they included some librarians) were also sensitive to a need for some expression of a common and widely accepted view of a particular aspect of the (white, Anglo-Celtic) Australian character. Hence the emergence, which the man himself would have found entirely repugnant, of a media barrage which took the form of something very like idolatry. Information was the principal ingredient of the artillery.

Information of another kind dominates the ongoing and now increasingly sour and caustic argument about the Stolen Generation (I refuse to use quotation marks), generating tidal ebbs and flows of claim and counter-claim. It is interesting to observe that the fulcrum in the argument is a document, a collection of a particular kind of information, and that the perceptions of the validity, of the 'truth' of such information can evoke such powerful feelings in the intellectual and political community. The fact that perhaps 250 000 people voted for reconciliation with their feet is another truth which can be set aside or become irrelevant.

The point I make is an obvious, perhaps even a trite, one. Information is now a dominant factor or commodity in our culture. It is at once pervasive, scarce, influential, trivial and significant. Our professional ethos now rests on the often reiterated, but largely untested assumption that information is good for you, whether it is real or virtual, true or false. A recent newspaper article discussing our profession used the meaningless coining 'cybrarian' to describe what it is that we assert we do, but it had nothing to say regarding issues of equity, validity or the other moral dimensions of the process of mediating in the information realm. I suggest that this reflects the nature of our professional position, whatever terms we use to convey it.

The wider questions of the quality, reliability, transparency, contamination, validity, authenticity of information seem not to arise. These problems have assumed a much greater significance with the exponential growth of access to information, and the extreme difficulty of evaluation and validation attaching to information that comes to us via the World Wide Web.

These are the issues that should be exercising a profession that would wish to claim the intellectual and moral high ground in the debate about information access and equity. ■

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