

CONSIDERING

WHERE
LADY
WISDOM
LIVES

words
CHERIE GILMOUR

Leonardo da Vinci, *Virgin and Child with St Anne and John the Baptist (detail)*, 1499-1500 | National Gallery, London

MATHILDE



Out in the open, wisdom calls aloud, she raises her voice in the public square.

— Proverbs 1:20

The march of science and technology does not imply growing intellectual complexity in the lives of most people. It often means the opposite.

— Thomas Sowell

AS A CHILD, I LOVED poring over the heavy, dusty encyclopaedias on my parents' bookshelf. Lying on the carpet in the lounge room next to the cabinet of crystals, I was transported around the world to see people living in different countries and times, strange creatures past and present, and significant historical events. Each page was carefully documented with hand-drawn pictures in incredible detail. I would admire a traditional dress from Peru, before examining the skin texture of a Diplodocus, or weapons used by the Ancient Romans. The height of technology in the '90s was loading the computer with Encyclopaedia Britannica CD-ROMs at school and navigating the same books through a screen. We had a computer at home, and it was magic when we first connected to the Internet with its alien-sounding dial-up. The click of a button would produce pages and pages of pictures and information about anything; it was the Wild West of information, a never-ending landscape of wormholes into unusual places. If I'd had an inkling of what the Internet would become and how it would morph into an all-consuming beast, I might have approached it cautiously, but I was young, and the future was bright.

Today, we are swimming in information, a veritable tower of Babel connecting us to every corner of the earth. We turn to news and aggregation sites to catalogue it, lest we find ourselves lost in its depths. But in this epoch of information, where we hold the world and the knowledge of all good and evil (as per Adam and Eve's desired 'forbidden fruit'), are we any wiser than previous generations? Or is it having the opposite effect?

Oxford Languages defines information as 'facts provided or learned about something or someone'. This is its simplest definition, although these 'facts' can take endless forms.

Mankind's relationship to information and how we collect, store, and disseminate it has always been a grand quest, from the ancient stone tablets of Mesopotamia to the overwhelming 59,194,179 pages on Wikipedia, the open-source online encyclopaedia today. In his epic exploration of information history, *The Information*, James Gleick points out that 'the alphabet was a founding technology of information'. He scales through history, from the African talking drum, in which messages would be communicated through its beats, to the creator of the dictionary, up to the origins of the first computers.

In 2009, Rob Matthews, a graphic design student, printed out 437 Wikipedia articles, which totalled 5,000 pages, and turned it into an encyclopaedia of 2.16 metres. The cover itself resembles an encyclopaedia of old, with a gold embossed Wikipedia logo on the front. In binding the seemingly boundless online encyclopaedia, it showed in physical detail the vast levels of information available to us. 'Wiki is not paper' used to be the unofficial motto of Wikipedia, which makes its physical appearance all the more alarming.

The advent of the Internet, and even more so, of Wikipedia, signalled the end of the physical encyclopaedia, whose roots can be traced back to Ancient Rome in a tome called *Natural History* by Pliny the Elder. Its sections have descriptive titles such as, *People Who Now Exist Or Formerly Existed*, *The Comparative Distances Of Places On The Face Of The Earth*, *Some Account Of The Teeth And Some Facts Concerning Infants*, and *The Different Shapes Of Sheep*. When reading through the chapters translated from Latin, it's clear that storytelling still played a significant role in transmitting knowledge. For example, rather than any scientific study of the human brain and how memory works, Pliny writes stories of figures like King Cyrus, who knew all of the soldiers in his army by name. In instances of remarkable agility, there are stories of men who ran immense distances, and geography becomes understood through the letters and records of people who have traversed distant places.

Rather than the clinical detail we're used to in scientific studies today, these ancient peoples gathered knowledge through stories and examples, trying to find the limits of the physical and biological world in this manner.

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Information, once contained in books, has evolved into a shape-shifter, constantly changing and updating itself. Academic institutions and publications warn against using Wikipedia as a source of information, but we so often do. Who would go hunting through academic journals and textbooks for the theory of relativity when you could summon it on Wikipedia with a single click? In a 2004 interview, Jimmy Wales, Wikipedia's co-creator, said, 'Imagine a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge. That's what we're doing'.

The 'crowd-sourced' model of information on Wikipedia has meant that there is always contention over specific definitions. Gleick gives an example of the Wikipedia article 'cat' in 2006, in which people argued whether a human cat owner should be referred to as 'owner', 'caregiver', or 'human companion', with the three-week tussle resulting in conversations 'the length of a small book'. Everyone is an expert, fighting for their understanding to be the primary definition. It sounds like a modern day version of the Biblical story of Babel, where different languages suddenly confused and prevented communication, resulting in chaos. Except in this updated narrative, rather than languages confusing us, the aim of the game is our interpretation of information fighting for dominance through our multifaceted perceptions.

With the Internet enabling everyone to have a platform to transmit what they know, disinformation has become the buzzword of the 21st century. In her recent book, *Shining Bright*, Australian journalist Julia Baird describes our predicament and social climate: 'The silos in which we consume information dot the media landscape like skyscrapers, and the growing distrust of the press, politicians, and public figures has in some ways choked our ability to cut each other slack, to allow each other to stumble, to forgive one another'. These silos, or echo-chambers as some refer to them, result from our ability to build our own realities online. Name a contentious issue—COVID-19 vaccines, geopolitical warfare, or controversial identity politics—and you will find pockets of the Internet that will support whatever you already believe. We live in a post-truth era, floating in information without knowing where solid ground is.

Australia's own proposed Disinformation Bill has come under fire from free speech groups, who claim that there is no consideration of how to balance censoring objectively untrue

information with protecting the freedom of people to express unpopular or controversial opinions. Criticising the proposed bill, the Shadow Minister for Communications, David Coleman, points out on the Liberal Party's website that 'Nothing an academic says can be misinformation, but statements by somebody disagreeing with an academic can be misinformation'.

The crux of our information crisis is that we have lost the compass required to navigate truth. We may have more information than any other time in history, but we don't know what to do with it. The Book of Proverbs contains a striking image of 'Lady Wisdom' shouting in the public square for people to listen to her, but they will not. Wisdom is later described as 'more precious than gold or jewels', and in our present era, it is equally as rare.

Oxford Languages defines wisdom as 'having experience, knowledge and good judgement'. Charles Spurgeon, a 19th century preacher, described wisdom as 'the right use of knowledge'. The oft-quoted 'knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit, but wisdom is knowing not to put it in a fruit salad' illustrates this well.

Maria Popova, writer and curator of beautifully thoughtful articles on the website *The Marginalian*, wrote an essay summarising our present predicament. 'We believe that having access to more information produces more knowledge, which results in more wisdom. But, if anything, the opposite is true—more and more information without the proper context and interpretation

only muddles our understanding of the world rather than enriching it', she writes. She likens the relationship between information, knowledge, and wisdom to a ladder. In the first step, you have information, as previously described, encompassing some facts about the world. In the second step, you have knowledge, which is more of a complex image of how these facts fit together and form a larger picture. The final step is wisdom, which pertains to the moral dimension of knowing. As Popova puts it: 'It is the application of information worth remembering and knowledge that matters to understanding not only how the world works, but also how it should work'.

Writer Bill Bryson, known for his hilarious travel books, turned his attention to the human body in his 2019 book *The Body: A Guide For Occupants*. He uses his trademark humour to describe some astonishing facts about the human body—if your lungs were unpacked, they would cover the size of a tennis court; or that you blink around 14,000

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times a day; or that the outermost layer of your skin is made up entirely of dead skin cells ('It is an arresting thought that all that makes you lovely is deceased,' Bryson quips). He does a deep dive into the worlds of our cells, DNA, the information that's transferred through touch, and the extraordinary daily work of your heart. But this information does little to tell us about the experience of being human, apart from some of the notable physical sensations. For example, knowing facts about the heart does not make someone a more loving partner or parent. It does not decrease the feeling of heartbreak, or help you to be in love. You might learn that your optic nerve only processes about ten percent of the information about what you see, and the rest comes from other parts of the brain responsible for 'recognis[ing] faces, interpret[ing] movements, [and] identify[ing] danger', as Bryson writes. But this does not account for how you feel spiritually uplifted when you see a beautiful work of art, or a snow-capped mountain rising out of the clouds. It does not explain the surge of love you feel when you look at your children, or why you can't look away when witnessing a tragedy.

Our information about what constitutes the human body tells us little about our inner world, constructed from thoughts, dreams, memories, and imagination.

'Amid the torrent and its fury, what is to become of thought—care and calm and quiet thoughtfulness? What of our own chance of ever gaining wisdom? Do we need it? Does anybody? How does a world function when no one within it is wise?', Simon Winchester writes in his book, *Knowing What We Know*. Popova concludes her essay by expressing

what some of us already know and feel deeply in our bones: storytellers hold the key to wisdom. They weave stories with threads of fact, knowledge, and wisdom into a beautiful creation that speaks straight to the heart. Storytellers do not simply ask 'how' but 'why'? In a world awash with information, we need storytellers more than ever to rise and start to make sense of the world. Our hearts are not moved by facts alone, but by joining them to knowledge and wisdom. We need people with open eyes who can connect the dots and share their stories that have been hard-won through blood, sweat, and tears. We have come so far from the days of Pliny the Elder and his storytelling mode of collecting information—perhaps it's time to return. We should be listening for stories, like the smallest, purest call of a bellbird amid a raging storm.

*Knowledge of speech but not of silence;
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the
Word.*

*All our knowledge brings us nearer to our
ignorance,*

*All our ignorance brings us nearer to death,
But nearness to death no nearer to God.*

T.S. Eliot (1934)



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