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Faking Cultural Literacy

By KARL TARO GREENFELD MAY 24, 2014

LOS ANGELES — I CAN'T help it. Every few weeks, my wife mentions the latest book her book club is reading, and no matter what it is, whether I've read it or not, I offer an opinion of the work, based entirely on ... what, exactly? Often, these are books I've not even read a review or essay about, yet I freely hold forth on the grandiosity of Cheryl Strayed or the restrained sentimentality of Edwidge Danticat. These data motes are gleaned, apparently, from the ether — or, more realistically, from various social media feeds.

What was Solange Knowles's elevator attack on Jay-Z about? I didn't watch the security-camera video on TMZ — it would have taken too long — but I scrolled through enough chatter to know that Solange had scrubbed her Instagram feed of photos of her sister, Beyoncé. How about this season of "Game of Thrones" and that nonconsensual intercourse in the crypt? I don't watch the show, but I've scanned the recaps on Vulture.com, and I am prepared to argue that this was deeply offensive. Is Pope Francis a postmodern pontiff? I've never listened to one of his homilies nor watched his recent "60 Minutes" appearance, but I've seen plenty of his @Pontifex tweets retweeted, so I'm ready to say his position on inequality and social justice is remarkably progressive.

It's never been so easy to pretend to know so much without actually knowing anything. We pick topical, relevant bits from Facebook, Twitter or emailed news alerts, and then regurgitate them. Instead of watching "Mad Men" or the Super Bowl or the Oscars or a presidential debate, you can simply scroll through someone else's live-tweeting of it, or read the recaps the next day. Our cultural canon is becoming determined by whatever gets the most clicks.

In his 1987 book “Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know,” E. D. Hirsch Jr. listed 5,000 essential concepts and names — 1066, Babbitt, Pickwickian — that educated people should be familiar with. (Or at least that’s what I believe he wrote, not having actually read the book.) Mr. Hirsch’s book, along with its contemporary “The Closing of the American Mind” by Allan Bloom, made the point that cultural literacy — Mr. Bloom’s canon — was the bedrock of our agreed-upon values.

What we all feel now is the constant pressure to know enough, at all times, lest we be revealed as culturally illiterate. So that we can survive an elevator pitch, a business meeting, a visit to the office kitchenette, a cocktail party, so that we can post, tweet, chat, comment, text as if we have seen, read, watched, listened. What matters to us, awash in petabytes of data, is not necessarily having actually consumed this content firsthand but simply knowing that it exists — and having a position on it, being able to engage in the chatter *about* it. We come perilously close to performing a pastiche of knowledgeable ability that is really a new model of know-nothingness.

NPR’s April Fools’ Day web story “Why Doesn’t America Read Anymore?” went viral on Facebook, where pranksters in on the joke linked to the piece and others then argued that they *do too* read and indignantly shared the link with exhortations to “read the story!” without actually clicking on it themselves to see that the only content was the revelation that the whole thing was a prank: “We sometimes get the sense that some people are commenting on NPR stories that they haven’t actually read. If you are reading this, please like this post and do not comment on it. Then let’s see what people have to say about this ‘story.’ ”

According to a recent survey by the American Press Institute, nearly six in 10 Americans acknowledge that they do nothing more than read news headlines — and I know this only because I skimmed a Washington Post headline about the survey. After we’ve skimmed, we share. Commenters frequently start their posts with TL;DR — short for Too Long; Didn’t Read — and then proceed to offer an opinion on the subject at hand anyway. As Tony Haile, the chief executive of the web traffic analytics company Chartbeat, recently put it, “We’ve found effectively no correlation between social shares and people actually reading.” (He tweeted that.)

It’s not lying, exactly, when we nod knowingly at a cocktail party or over

drinks when a colleague mentions a movie or book that we have not actually seen or read, nor even read a review of. There is a very good chance that our conversational partner may herself be simply repeating the mordant observations of someone in her timeline or feed. The entire in-person exchange is built from a few factoids netted in the course of a day's scanning of iPhone apps. Who wants to be the Luddite who slows everything down by admitting he has never actually read a Malcolm Gladwell book and maybe doesn't exactly understand what is meant by the term "Gladwellian" — though he occasionally uses it himself?

Whenever anyone, anywhere, mentions anything, we must pretend to know about it. Data has become our currency. (And in the case of Bitcoin, a classic example of something that we all talk about but nobody actually seems to understand, I mean that literally.)

Those of us in the business of gathering, dispensing and otherwise trafficking in information may be among the worst offenders. Recently I was on the phone with an editor who mentioned a piece by a prominent author. I claimed I had read the story. It was only later in the conversation that it became clear to me that the article had not yet been published and I could not possibly have read it. By then we had moved on to discussing a possible article on a California politician caught in a rather complicated scandal. Neither of us could come up with his first name. Did that prevent us from talking pseudo-knowledgably about the pros and cons of the potential story? Absolutely not.

It's understandable that one party or even both parties in a conversation may have only the faintest idea of what is being talked about. We're all very busy — busier, if I believe the harried responses (when there are any at all) to most emails I send, than any previous generation. And because we spend so much time staring at our phones and screens, texting and tweeting about how busy we are, we no longer have the time to consume any primary material. We rely instead on the casual observations of our "friends" or the people we "follow" or, well, who, actually?

Who decides what we know, what opinions we see, what ideas we are repurposing as our own observations? Algorithms, apparently, as Google, Facebook, Twitter and the rest of the social media postindustrial complex rely on these complicated mathematical tools to determine what we are actually reading and seeing and buying.

We have outsourced our opinions to this loop of data that will allow us to hold steady at a dinner party, though while you and I are ostensibly talking about “The Grand Budapest Hotel,” what we are actually doing, since neither of us has seen it, is comparing social media feeds. Does anyone anywhere ever admit that he or she is completely lost in the conversation? No. We nod and say, “I’ve heard the name,” or “It sounds very familiar,” which usually means we are totally unfamiliar with the subject at hand.

THERE was a time when we knew where we were getting our ideas. In my eighth grade English class, we were assigned “A Tale of Two Cities,” and lest we enjoy the novel, we were instructed to read Charles Dickens’s classic with an eye toward tracking the symbolism in the text. One afternoon while I was in the library, struggling to find symbols, I ran into a few of my classmates, who removed from their pockets folded yellow and black pamphlets that read “Cliffs Notes” and beneath that the title of Dickens’s novel in block letters. That “study guide” was a revelation.

Here were the plot, the characters, even the symbols, all laid out in paragraphs and bullet points. I read the Cliffs Notes in one night, and wrote my B paper without finishing the novel. The lesson was not to immerse and get lost in the actual cultural document itself but to mine it for any valuable ore and minerals — data, factoids, *what you need to know* — and then trade them on the open market.

With the advent of each new technology — movable type, radio, television, the Internet — there have been laments that the end is nigh for illuminated manuscripts, for books, magazines and newspapers. What is different now is the ubiquity of the technology that is replacing every old medium.

The information is everywhere, a constant feed in our hands, in our pockets, on our desktops, our cars, even in the cloud. The data stream can’t be shut off. It pours into our lives a rising tide of words, facts, jokes, GIFs, gossip and commentary that threatens to drown us. Perhaps it is this fear of submersion that is behind this insistence that we’ve seen, we’ve read, we *know*. It’s a none-too-convincing assertion that we are still afloat. So here we are, desperately paddling, making observations about pop culture memes, because to admit that we’ve fallen behind, that we don’t know what anyone is talking about, that we have nothing to say about each passing blip on the

screen, is to be dead.

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