Chapter 6. Local and Distant Knowledges, Local and Distant Minds

Consider a reader lost within a book written by an author from another country and centuries ago. The reader isn't paying much attention to the people and situations in the here and now and may not even recognize when someone at their shoulder is trying to get their attention. Where is the mind of the reader? In the there and then? Or in some virtual place hovering above here/there, now/then? A person writing may be even more focused somewhere else, harder to call back to the here and now, and more irritated at the summons.

The natural tendency of humans, like most animals, is to attend to the world immediately surrounding them—to find food and water, to see threats in the immediate environment. to find opportunities for increased survival and comfort, to connect with one's family and tribe, to form relationships and bonds. The extended period of human childhood, furthermore, provides a long time for our brains and neural systems to attune to our social and natural environments, making it possible for humans to survive and thrive under varied conditions with extended senses of our time and place.

When humans began to communicate with others of the species through language, we increased our sharing of information, our ability to coordinate and plan, and our transmission of cultural practices, heritage knowledge, and beliefs. Becoming informed about what was seen, heard, and felt by others made us more knowledgeable about threats and opportunities; our ability to collaborate and empathize with each other also attuned us to those around us. Such knowledge helped our tribe's hunting and gathering, agriculture, and provision of protective, comfortable shelter. Loyalties, trust, and leadership were granted to those who could put this knowledge together, calculate choices, and guide us through our local world. We came to respect the traditions, knowledge, wisdom, and histories passed down to us from our elders, and we attempted to apply them to the world we experienced daily.

Human intelligence evolved in our material and social worlds with special attention to the people around us—their knowledge, their moods, and our relations with them. In so doing, humans refined local tasks and practices, created local arts, and excelled in locally prized activities. This use of our intelligence, perceptions, and senses helped us gain the most from our circumstances. We may, however, have been dubious about those who spoke other languages, had different traditions and practices, or had different leadership and trust networks.

Literacy Expands Not Only Communicative Reach but Also Social Tensions

Literacy opened new pathways for human development, supplementing our local

attention and neural development with information and relations from a distance, enriching what we can bring to our local circumstances and communities. Writing initially strengthened, extended, and codified local practices and connections. Keeping track of crops, sealing transactions and promises, recording local rules and tribute obligations, maintaining community histories, praising the greatness of leaders, keeping alive the memory and wisdom of forbears—all these drew us further into our communities, even as we were able to extend the vision and coherence of the communities, economic activities, and beliefs to larger regions (Goody, 1986). From this perspective writing seemed to create some tensions within local worlds, as class, wealth, and power differences might have been heightened because writers and literates had greater access to information, records, knowledge, and communication with others. Literates wielded more of the power of connection, control of wealth, and understanding of rules and other social regulation. People in power, if they themselves did not read or write, became dependent on the skills of those that did. Others at the periphery of power and wealth typically came to respect the power wielded by literates. While these developments may have exacerbated existing power and wealth differences in societies, they did not necessarily produce differences of knowledge and belief. In fact, they tended to consolidate current structures, relations, power, and wealth as well as to hold cultures, practices, and beliefs constant. Texts could pass down with little change from generation to generation, with fewer changes than within an oral tradition that transformed with every retelling. The understanding of the ancients, or divinities, embodied in the founding works of society, gained special authority.

The increased ability to communicate with other societies, however, could also create tensions within a society by making available knowledge, beliefs, and practices from other societies while fostering bonds with people whom one has never met. Communication at a distance could differentiate the perspectives, knowledge, commitments, interests, and affiliation of those having such cosmopolitan experiences from those whose knowledge and experience remained only local. Cosmopolitans, consequently, might be seen to be corrupted, subverted, seduced, misled, or otherwise separated from the community's perspectives, values, and interests to align with the interests or points of views of untrustworthy strangers.

Communication with other groups about their knowledges, ways, experiences, histories, and conditions of their lives brought possibilities for comparison, the questioning of taken for granted assumptions, and the seeing of things in new ways (Eisenstein, 1979). Knowledges of animals, geology, climate and seasons, diseases, medications, resources, and other material conditions in other places provided more complete and fundamental understanding of the world we live in. Written works as well could aggregate, evaluate, synthesize, and solve puzzles based on more information, data, and clues. Extended written discourses could seek more rigorous coherence and logic within and across texts. In short, literacy brought knowledge and intellectual power of understanding, making literates even more valuable to those willing to listen to their extended knowledge.

So the wealthy and powerful were caught in a dilemma. They needed more of these literate-trained people to administer their wealth and power. They also benefited from what these literates learned, knew, and innovated—yet that knowledge and change challenged the existing order sanctified in the ancient texts and oral traditions. Even if literacy was held tightly within the families of elites, tensions of knowledge could arise, but often the powerful needed to recruit and train people of other classes and conditions to assist with the proliferating tasks literacy turned out to be good for.

Institutions of Literacy as Flashpoints

Schools, houses of the learned, and libraries were particular sites of these tensions from early times, with the tensions growing from generation to generation. At one extreme, scribes and teachers could be trained entirely within a community and never travel beyond it, unaware of developments, cultures, and experiences outside their community. Even today some communities insist that teachers and librarians come from within the community, are trained without leaving the community, share local values, and offer only an approved traditional canon, or even just one authoritative book (with perhaps associated elaborating texts) which is taken to embody all of knowledge and wisdom for the community. Yet commonly teachers and librarians seek knowledge from outside and read nonlocal books, periodicals, or now digital media. They often are trained at some distance from their community to which they may return with new skills and knowledges. The people who train them are typically even more cosmopolitan and draw on skills, ideas, and knowledge that come from a great distance. Often it has been necessary, and even advantageous, to draw teachers and librarians from outside the community and trained at distant institutions with access to different knowledges. From ancient times, educational centers have been associated with libraries, collections, experts, and even researchers. The great library of ancient Alexandria was attached to schools and scholars inquiring into nature, medicine, history, and the human arts. It also was the place where scholars steeped themselves in prior knowledge to write works that would inform future generations of the educated. So it is not surprising that tensions between communities and schools with their associated libraries have continuously arisen, as schools can be perceived as diverging from community values and certitudes, thereby corrupting the young.

Even within closed religious communities, divergent voices disputed conflicting interpretations of canonical texts. Factions within such learned communities often invited knowledge from outside and collected books from elsewhere, as in the libraries of Constantinople, the House of Wisdom in Baghdad, and the Jesuitical centers around the world. We should also not forget that with the tools of literacy young people could express their curiosity about the world and question the views of elders by seeking texts from afar, even if some of them were to later return to community orthodoxies.

Centralizing institutions seeking uniformity of belief and loyalty have repeatedly sought to limit the texts available through censorship and control of the means of text reproduction, especially with the advent of the printing press. China was able for some centuries to restrict uses of the printing press to state purposes; the Roman Catholic church has attempted to censor books since the Middle Ages; England and some other countries were able to impose prior censorship through licensing; other states made ownership of certain books criminal; currently many countries to varying degrees restrict what can appear on the internet, and book banning is reemerging in the United States. Nonetheless, the written word eventually seems to find a way to reach its readers. Control of curricula, restrictions on teachers, professions of faith, or suspicious monitoring by community school boards continue to be rearguard actions against the portability of ideas and knowledge that comes with writing, printing, and more recent technologies of sharing texts.

The differentiation of knowledge, attention, and conceptualization continued to expand in the wake of literacy with factionalism, struggles between forms of orthodoxies, and battles of the books between ancients and moderns. Furthermore, writing gave rise to different communities of interest and different forms of social organization. Finances, law, medicine, astronomy, agriculture, architecture, and many other domains formed networks relying on and advancing specialized knowledge and perspectives inscribed in texts. Legal systems engaged many people including police, legislators, judges, lawyers, clerks, and ordinary citizens. Financial knowledge engaged institutions, banks, insurance companies, investment organizations, and governments, each with their own internal records, complex of employees, relations with related institutions, and relations with client citizens. Businesses and corporations each formed their own ecosystems of knowledge and texts, which embodied and elaborated institutions, practices, circuits of communication, roles, and records—all dependent on the infrastructure of writing. Even within each of these worlds, people in different roles or different departments represented in their texts different parts of the world, even though they had to coordinate with other people and groups within the organization and related organizations.

Social systems concerning governance, law, church, and finance grew early and rapidly, creating many documents inscribing their newly collected data as well as their internally generated records. Schools grew to provide literate people to serve the needs of the systems but at first did not produce much in the way of new knowledge beyond their internal administrative data. Instead, they largely reproduced the significations and knowledge of the institutions they served. Students for government service in ancient Mesopotamia, for example, learned writing by copying the government tax and census rolls. In religious institutions the sacred texts formed the core of literacy education. However, over time, schools became associated with new learning and thought and with inquiring into the nature of the world and human life, with Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum being early examples.

In the Christian West, however, education became dominated by the Church, which sought to reproduce traditional knowledges and canons of texts. In China education was equally conservative, dominated by governmental administrative careers dependent on the Confucian canon. Independent research, however, began to emerge during the European Renaissance, often driven by practical needs of military, engineering, navigation, economic exploitation of colonies, and so on. Curiosity about the natural world and its wonders also grew through exploration and early colonial activities. In the late 18th century, after some delay, higher education started to be more influenced by research and the production of knowledge, culminating in the research university which has come to dominate education.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, research universities fostered specialization of knowledge and the emergence of disciplines and departments along with proliferation of specialized subjects of study, degrees, faculty, and academic societies. People in different research fields came to know different things and develop different views of what was interesting and important in life. Even within specialization, differentiation of views and inquiries was encouraged as part of developing new knowledge, publishing new information, and exploring new ideas. Contention over points of view was expected as part of the process of encouraging potential knowledge and sorting out what was reliable through disciplinary debate. Within these specialized areas, however, methods became central issues of concern, as they controlled the production of evidence for new claims that could not be dismissed within these specialized communities. These specialized methods of gathering information about the world and the unusual information gathered through them made their knowledge even more "uncommon." These highly specialized ways of gathering information about the world and reasoning from them would then permeate other levels of education through curricula and textbooks, as the various school subjects would look to the knowledge produced by research institutions and universities as authoritative sources for what they taught. This can increase even further the tensions between schools and the local communities they serve, as schools can appear "corrupted by elites" when they adopt curricular directions influenced by higher education.

As a consequence, universities increasingly have become flashpoints of the tensions between local commonsense values and unusual cosmopolitan values arising from specialized literate cultures. Yet all literate domains of society which collect and rely on specialized knowledge can raise tensions with local communities as well as with each other—whether governmental, corporate, financial, academic, religious, philosophical, cultural, or otherwise socially distinct.

The Messiness of the Fragmentation of Knowledge

Each world of textual affiliation can become associated with distinct knowledge, interests, values, and views of the world as they became removed from the common sense of immediate, local experience. The "uncommon sense" fostered

within these groups may be seen by others as unusual, weird, perhaps idiosyncratic, and to be treated with suspicion, even if the uncommon sense offers obvious benefits, such as the ability to predict climate disasters or cure diseases. Also, each distinct group with all its subvariants can foster individuals who are likely to see much of the world in different ways and perhaps see their specialized perspective as the single most important way to see things, whether it is the production and economic viability of particular energy sources, the biology of ecosystems, the analysis and remediation of historical wrongs, the maintenance of religious communities, or the aggregation of political power. These people all may exist within the same geographic and political jurisdiction with each other and with others who are guided by the most local of concerns. Divisions, differences, and tensions may proliferate on any issue where the concerns of these groups meet. While I or any other person may have preferences and evaluations of those with another view, there is no a priori reason why any one person or group should or could dominate the direction of our shared social life.

So what are we to make of this fragmentation? And what are we to do about it? We cannot wish it away, nor would we want to rid ourselves of all the knowledge and benefits that have come with our proliferating literacy, knowledge, and thought. Nor can or ought we declare that one perspective is more worthy than another and ought to govern decision making in conflicts.

There seems to be little choice but to accept the messiness and challenges of choice making and providing forums for the conflicting interests (in both senses of curiosities and advantages) to work through compromises and agreements. Each seeks to gain its best advantage to advance as much of its interests or agenda as it can by whatever means it has at hand in whatever social forum it has access to. In ways both predictable and unpredictable, the institutions we have created for our mutual government have been and continue to be skewed to give more influence to some groups than others. Most of these interests, would if they could, rule authoritatively (and even authoritarianly) to pursue their vision of how to make the world better and pursue the interests it sees as most important—whether religious purity, unconstrained capitalist investment, social justice, full employment, environmental protection, engineering design, or information technology. The best we as a society can do, seems to me, is to keep the playing field as fair as possible and support forums where clashing interests can make their best cases about the way the world is and how to make the best of it. In short, democratic deliberation under rule of law or some representative version of it seems to be the only way to avoid the tyranny of any perspective, no matter how appealing that vision may appear. It is also the only way we can factor in the multitudes of knowledges and forms of human affiliation and organization that have evolved in the literate world. Such democratic contention is painful, messy, frustrating, irritating, and often deeply disappointing, but it keeps the questions and decisions in front of us. The health of democratic institutions depends on keeping one perspective from gaining dominant power, no matter how benign

or necessary it seems at the moment. History teaches us that such arrangements don't remain benign for long, and even the most high-minded interests can rapidly deteriorate to private advantages and the oppression of others committed to other visions of knowledge and affiliation.

References

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