Information Seeking

Essay by Joshua Kraus

Part I

Information includes everything. A definition for information seeking then, must be extracted from this vast mess. When excluding the biased emotional decisions we make, and foregoing all the precursing knowledge one has, we are left with the simplest reason for why one seeks information. It must be to fill a knowledge gap. These exclusions formulate an *ideal* definition of the information seeker, however in real life I recognize I am not an "ideal." There are my motives, my resources, and my prior knowledge to consider. These all influence the type of information I seek, and whether I consider that information valid or useful. This recognition of real vs ideal gave me four important facets to examine about the information seeker: their catalyst, their prior knowledge, their ability to search and their relationships. I also discovered the subjectiveness of information validity from one seeker to another. When we ask questions, we presume we ask them with an open mind, with a willingness to accept new information even if it contradicts our existing knowledge base. But more often, information seekers find only what they want to find. Our ability to assimilate and validate new information is limited by our own narrow perception, and by the resulting narrowness of our questions.

The catalyst of the search must be recognized as part of the seeking itself. Without a catalyst, there would be no seeking. Important to the catalyst is the emotion induced by it, how powerfully it made me, the seeker react. We do not seek emotionlessly, there is always a desire involved to find answers, your motivator. The catalyst invokes the seekers curiosity too, touching upon a prior knowledge base. We are often most curious about things we know a bit about, and from curiosity comes information seeking.

The catalyst has a final aspect; the nature of it, being an "impetus moment," must mean it interacts with something in our minds. This interaction is with our prior knowledge, and it is what leads to the second important facet, the seekers knowledge base. This, I reasoned critical, since we must already *know* what we are looking for, before we seek it (either in the conscious or subconscious.) Our curiosity cannot be piqued without some previous insight. One does not care until they know they do— there must be a moment of affirmation in our minds, accepting the act of information seeking worthy, based off what we already know. Our responses then are not reflexive, their habituated, learnt and stored information. In seeking answers, the questions we generate are solely determined by this storehouse of prior knowledge and prior perception. What I am willing and able to ask is limited by what I've been capable of perceiving. What I want to answer is *not* what I don't know, because what I don't know is all things inexplicable to me, all things not once thought of or perceived. Anything perceived, thought, or learnt, make up the individual's prior knowledge, and formulate the route of one query. An analogy to best visualize this concept is a picture of an Oak tree. When we look at the roots of this tree, there is nothing growing that isn't connected to the main trunk. Information seeking and gathering does not stem from nothingness, it inherently comes from something prior, and moves deeper from points of prior knowledge. There are no "tree-less" roots, just soil. Now imagine a specific root growing out from the tree. It may have been moving in a direction and at a set depth for years, that root isn't going to just detach and instantaneously grow elsewhere, far from where it's been all its years. Likewise, our questions don't come from detached places. It is impossible. Everything is just an extension of what's already there. Everything we think, ask, and seek- it all comes from the prior, what roots we already had. The prior knowledge base.

In the seeking of information, perhaps the most important thing to consider is one's ability to search. It is a necessary facet to consider, simply due to the gross inequality of information seeking among individuals. This is the most quantifiable of the three facets, and is rooted in wealth and technology. Two quantifiable aspects of any human life that alter the way someone will approach information seeking. In comparison to a less wealthy seeker I may use the resources of my wealth to assist my search. A simple example is my ability to purchase books or subscriptions to material, to aid in my information discovery. Access to *Learning Unlimited* (as horrible as it may be) to Lehigh Students, is an advantage of the "wealthy seeker." As an individual, my ability to seek is limited by what I can afford to access. Likewise, to a wealthier seeker I may lack the means necessary to fund deeper research or exploration of a topic. It may be impossible for me to reasonably afford the tools of seeking another can afford. In a very similar sense then, access to technology is drastic in one's ability to ask and answer. This is an element heightened by the age of technology we live in. Access to the internet shifts the feasibility of knowledge seeking behavior by magnitudes. The boundaries of "affordability" have been pushed far beyond what they ever have been in human history. YouTube and websites like Sci-Hub have changed the face of information accessibility. The latter site saved me thousands in molecular biology research as a high school student. Compared to the 2.9 billion people (as of 2023) who do not have internet access, my means of seeking are fundamentally different than theirs. I *start* with an option that changes the domain of information seeking. The individual with access to technology vs the individual without are different seekers entirely.

The final facet, relationships, is perhaps the one we forget (or perhaps choose not) to acknowledge most frequently. We generate different information simply by the influential relationships of the people around us. When's the last time you heard the saying: "surround

yourself with the people you want to be like?" The people, the relationships, someone surrounds themselves with, the groups they are born part of, where they live- it all effects the questions they pose, and the confidence they have in seeking answers. I want to stress here a critically relevant part of that. Being *born into* it. Innocent children born in Gaza live under the hateful, terrorist regime of Hamas. The organization has controlled the government of the Gaza strip since 2007. The children born here are not given the choice of who they surround themselves with at birth. They are born here inconsequently. Maybe they can choose their friends and perhaps this politically varies them by the smallest margins, but fundamentally, their hate for Israel will be taught to them by the people and leaders surrounding, whose relationships they trust and learn from. They are trapped under a regime of hatred, and do not know anything else. Just like the roots of the Oak tree from before, how can they feel a desire for peace if the seed of their "knowledge tree" was always growing in a direction of hate. I, the writer of this essay, have my own roots too. My roots are much different. I was born into a free country, I have free thought, free information, and a family that has the means to provide me with knowledge seeking abilities. Historical and anecdotal information I've *chosen* to collect governs my opinions. Most critically though, the relationships I hold with my Jewish family and Israeli friends shape my information seeking and perspectives. These relationships have given my information seeking a direction to follow. Our relationships give us direction and our desire to fill knowledge gaps along the way build the knowledge base we have. The incapacity to understand what is not known comes from never having the reason to look. This knowledge base, so suspectable to influence, can be pushed to "grow" in a singular direction. Asking questions then in the other direction, against what you solely know and think, is not only not feasible but nearly impossible. Questions, as we have established, don't come from nothing. It's the *impossibility* of thought

with the "Ideal definition" of information seeking, that is a core part of the Israel-Palestine conflict. There is no ideal in a real world. Actors are not "excluding the biased emotional decisions" and "foregoing all the precursing knowledge one has." They are basing their entire information seeking process off it. Fundamentally, we will not approach information seeking the same as a counterpart with different relationships, these different biases affecting them, molding them, molding their roots. The questions we ask may have similarity, but the goals are different, biased. It's a domino effect of a society- our information seeking is influenced by those who influence us, and those who influence them. An American based example would be a man whose parents are democrats and a man whose parents are republicans. They will not formulate the same question as their counterpart. "Will Trump be in Jail 2024" and "How will Trump run for office 2024" have drastically different background biases associated with them. It is in my relationships, and the biases these people hold, where I dictate what information I trust, what I deem worthy and helpful. My relationships are part of what influences my actions, and too what formulates my knowledge base. Its natural that we utilize the information provided by those around us to generate our perceptions and tailor our questions. It's how we have learnt, since long before we could even effectively communicate with one another. Learn by what's done around us. It may be a challenge to admit it, but we are just as impressionable as ducklings. It is how we enter the world and will continue to conceptualize it.

Part II

In reviewing the online material, I search for, I found the ability to classify it all into three main categories. The first, academic information seeking, all things relating to school and studies. This type of questioning is certain, and active. There is a goal in mind of understanding and completing. There is a pre-determined right and wrong, that guides my satisfaction with the material I come across. If it answers the question posed *to* me, I am done. The second, personal information seeking, categorizes all questions posed at understanding the wellbeing of myself and others. This type of query is nearly entirely anecdotal, or medical. "Why am I still coughing after three weeks" or "how do I ask my professor for an extension" are solid examples in this category. Finally comes reactionary information seeking. This is entirely done by simple ask-and-answer programs like Apple's Siri or Amazon's Alexa. These questions are highly random, and often incongruent with each other in topic and in content. Simple queries about facts, scores, and weather reports, all fall squarely into this last category.

The way I've come to process the online material is reasonably simple to define. To determine validity, I rely on "side by side" comparison of media and texts. This is nearly always a self-verifying process of information seeking, since the databases I choose to search with, display more than one resource at a time to explore. Additional tabs with "images" and "videos" also help in quickly sorting what information to compare and utilize. 90% of the time I rely on the Google search engine to answer my questions with the steps following: 1. Enter my question in my device's browser. 2. Receive the first page of results (this is important since I have never gone to a second page to find results). 3. Click links with relevant titles to my query and skim. 4. Backout and read another text or examine media for a side-by-side confirmation. This process is simple as it's laid out, and it is admittedly, maybe too simple. It's become clear that I rely heavily on the search engine to generate trustworthy responses and spend little quality time

determining true validity. If I have deemed the question as something "simple enough" to be answered by a web search I approach the answers as "simple enough to be right every time." I expect to get the truth always, and looking back, this over reliance may lead me to be susceptible to misinformation I wrongly deem easy enough to answer.

Big questions however, those that I do not deem simple, are almost never sought after online. Topics of "big questions" are more complex than can be satisfied with an image or a blurb. Sufficiency comes for me, with only a large quantity of quality information. For example, humility, religion, human nature, and success; these are topics no Google search will justify for me. Here, I seek information from my connections, my family and friends, and from books. I see both sources as dedicated, exemplary accounts of the question I'm working with. My family provides a link to people who have live through my questions before, as do books, with the added benefit of their depth, and understandability. Friends, similarly, may be working through the same questions as me, offering answers through their own actions, and experiences. Nearly always big questions are not answered by a single source. It is my own amalgamation of information, collected from knowledge of others, that provides me with an answer, or a direction towards one. Big questions, require complex thought and diversity, and I expect the answer to never fully satisfy, forcing ongoing research until I feel an acceptable level of content.

Information seeking is a subject that must be approached with reality and rationality first. There is no ideal information seeker, only one who is irrational and biased. These words should not be taken with a negative connotation. They are simply facts, with no emotion to be added. We must accept *without judgment* we are not, and never will be ideal. The "real definition" of information seeking was proven to me through recognition of the four facets laid out in this essay. No matter the search nor the subject, I could find in every instance the four facets. I can

account for the impetus, the prior knowledge, my ability to search and the relationships I have. These facets then are no longer just observations. These are the four *laws* of information seeking in a real world. You, I, any person who seeks to fill a knowledge gap will encounter them with certainty.