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2009

## Digital Deliberations

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Yoder, Stephen A., "Digital Deliberations" (2009). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council – Online Archive*. 493.

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# Digital Deliberations

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As I write this essay, Google has just announced that it will begin offering a new computer operating system (“Chrome OS”), competing with Microsoft and Apple. Both the form and substance of Google’s announcement are noteworthy. The company chose to make its announcement via the “Official Google Blog” rather than more traditional means such as a press release or press conference. As for substance, the new operating system will be “open source,” meaning that the source software programming code will be freely available to all who use it.

Google’s announcement can be seen as a sign of “the earliest stage of a massive social development” described by Cass Sunstein in *Infotopia: How Many Minds Produce Knowledge* (xii). Sunstein says that blogs, wikis, open-source software, and YouTube are all examples of emerging Internet-based, collaborative mechanisms for “deliberating,” supplementing more traditional forms of group deliberation such as focus groups, committee meetings, and legislative bodies.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd ed.) defines “deliberation” as “long and careful consideration.” As educators of honors students, we strive to teach them the skills necessary for deliberation, including research, debate, and exposition. Arguably, their talents will make them more likely to be deliberators. For example, some honors students will use deliberation skills as scholars creating new knowledge. Others will use these skills as leaders guiding social, political, and business organizations through inevitable uncertainties. All honors students can be expected to use their skills in deliberation to influence others within groups, perhaps as “indirect” leaders through the creation of their works, as described by Howard Gardner in *Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership*.

Regardless of the exact context of their future group deliberations, there is much for honors students to learn about the digital forms of deliberation that are emerging so that the deliberations can have desirable outcomes. In particular, Sunstein’s *Infotopia* cautions us to manage the risks inherent not only in traditional group deliberations but also in the new digital forms. He notes the following about all forms of deliberation:

- They amplify errors of their members;
- They do not elicit the information that their members have;
- They are subject to cascade effects, where the blind lead the blind; and
- They show a tendency toward group polarization, where groups can go to extremes. (Sunstein, 75)

Each of these risks creates opportunities for educating our students. As George Mariz notes in his lead essay for this Forum, honors students seek “the reality behind the appearances.” The new digital forms of deliberation create new “appearances” behind which even more risks can hide. Building on our honors students’ natural skepticism, we should help them appreciate these risks and not be blinded by the glitz of the new technologies.

## AMPLIFICATIONS OF ERRORS

The product of deliberations, digital or otherwise, should be good decisions. Unfortunately, research has shown that certain “rules of thumb we use to make decisions” (Sunstein, 75), also known as heuristics, can lead to bad decisions. Among the first to identify such flawed decision-making processes were the Israeli psychologists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman. Their 1974 essay “Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases” described the “representativeness” heuristic, which causes us to ignore important realities such as sample size when data conform to our stereotypes (Tversky and Kahneman, 1124–1127). Applied to digital deliberations, this kind of error might cause students to assume that a viewpoint they agree with on a particular blog is widely held in the general population even though relatively few bloggers are on the site.

Honors students might be more likely than other students to have views that are not mainstream because, as noted above, they are more likely than other students to seek the “reality beyond appearances.” In forming their personal views they may well have begun to move away from more mainstream Internet sites in favor of blogs or wikis that reflect their own voices but not those of the population at large. A potentially useful teaching tool might be to ask students to choose a topic (say, Sarah Palin) and then seek out as many blogs as possible that reflect a view different from their own on that topic. Many might be surprised to find other voices out there.

Another heuristic called “framing” can also lead to bad decisions. “Framing,” which refers to the context in which a decision is made, might be partially responsible for the decision by employees of Ford Motor Company in the 1970s to forego an \$11-per-car fix on the Pinto after concluding that it would cost more to the company than would the deaths and serious burns

resulting from not making the fix. Perhaps if the project had been framed as an ethical decision involving the value of human lives, the decision would have been different. For a discussion of the heuristics of business ethics decisions, see Robert Prentice's "Teaching Ethics, Heuristics, and Biases."

Some business organizations, such as accounting firms, have begun using internal wikis (software applications that allow multiple users to create and edit a document) to deliberate and develop knowledge on particular projects. Employees at all levels might be invited to participate. How the wiki project is framed can have a strong influence on the work product, a valuable lesson for students who might lead such projects in their careers, in business or otherwise. A project framed as the polishing of a boss's work product might have a very different result from one framed as a brain-storming exercise.

A potential class exercise might be for two groups to address the same issue in two separate, private online forums such as Discussion Boards on Blackboard, each framed in a different way at the start, and then to compare the progression of thought and final result. For example, one group might be assigned a forum to address the ethical issue of a pharmaceutical company pursuing unprofitable research into a drug that might benefit a relatively small number of mostly toddlers. The other group might have the issue framed in their forum as research into a drug aimed at a disease only affecting a comparably sized population of mostly elderly people.

## **FAILURE TO ELICIT INFORMATION**

A second risk in group deliberations is the "hidden profile," a term used to describe an accurate understanding that a group avoids in favor of a consensus that might be based on inaccuracies (Sunstein, 81). *Infotopia* cites the 1961 decision by the United States to invade the Cuban Bay of Pigs as an example of how pre-digital deliberations could fail to produce a good result. President Kennedy's advisors deliberated fully but were reluctant to speak up about their private doubts for fear of being labeled "soft" (Sunstein, 47).

Fear of incurring other group members' disapproval can motivate the continuation of "hidden profiles." For example, an individual may feel social pressure not to inject unique information that most group members lack (Sunstein, 87). Many of my honors students have failed to speak up in class discussions because they fear not appearing to be "one of the crowd," even in classes of only honors students. Fast forward a few years and it is easy to imagine a former honors student who is now a junior employee in a large organization not wishing to contribute to an internal wiki deliberation for the same reason.

As teachers, we can discourage “hidden profiles” by ourselves noting the “elephant in the room” during class discussions (or following discussions on online forums such as Blackboard Discussion Boards) and providing positive reinforcement to students who do the same. Another exercise might be to ask students whether they have ever deliberately withheld information from a class discussion or other group deliberation and, if so, why. Chances are that many would cite social pressure.

## CASCADE EFFECTS

Closely related to the problem of hidden profiles, Sunstein says, is the problem of information cascades, where group members follow the crowd on inaccurate information, contributing to an inaccurate group understanding of an issue. Sunstein cites tonsillectomies in the 1950s and 1960s as an example of a widespread medical practice that was “adopted initially based on weak information” (90), referencing John F. Burnum’s article “Medical Practice a la Mode: How Medical Fashions Determine Medical Care” (1220). It is likely that many patients, particularly children, were subjected to this relatively invasive and expensive surgical procedure when they could have been treated successfully with less risk and lower cost.

In addition to surgical procedures, Burnum’s pre-digital-age article gives some examples of drug treatments that reflected more “the desire to be stylish” than good science. He cites treatment of pneumonia at Johns Hopkins with various drugs when “ordinary penicillin would have sufficed” (1221). Burnum explained this herd behavior as resulting from the fact that “physicians tend to pick up their prescribing habits more from one another than from the scientific literature” (1221).

The doctors’ lounge has no doubt been supplemented (and perhaps superseded) by the Internet as a way for physicians to deliberate about patient treatment. Honors students considering careers in medicine can learn from this example that even well-educated professionals can deliberate in an ineffective way. They can also learn that no amount of digital deliberation can substitute for “reading the literature.”

Another pedagogical tool for studying the cascade effect and other pitfalls of digital deliberations might be to examine the decision by Wikipedia, the free on-line encyclopedia, to limit in certain situations its regular policy on open editing. For example, entries such as those on George W. Bush and Abu Ghraib prison became the subject of so much disinformation that Wikipedia instituted a policy of “blocking” certain users from editing entries in order to prevent damage or disruption to the site. Such attacks of disinformation can be exacerbated by the cascade effect. Students might also observe

the same “piling on” in online forums, including one developed as part of an honors class using tools like Blackboard’s Discussion Board.

## GROUP POLARIZATION

*Infotopia* describes a final problem with all deliberations, including the digital variety, when members of a deliberating group “typically end up in a more extreme position in line with their tendencies before deliberation began” (Sunstein, 92). Numerous blogs illustrate this “echo chamber” effect that Sunstein describes (97). In one of my honors classes, for instance, a student in a group presentation cited, as an authority for his research on a particular company, an unofficial and highly critical blog written by a disgruntled former employee. The blog’s viewpoint was similar to the student’s own initial views and contributed to a strengthening of his negative position. This episode provided a good vehicle for group discussion not only of the potential for polarization in a blog but also for the heuristic risk of ignoring the representativeness of the blog’s viewpoint. The search for blogs with contrarian views that are similar to a student’s own views, described above under “Amplification of Errors,” might also illustrate the “echo chamber” effect of the student’s choice of Internet sites.

## CONCLUSION

Honors students will be deliberators in many groups over their lives, probably more than other students because their abilities make them more likely to be asked to find answers amid uncertainty. As scholars, for example, they will gather, assess, share, and reach conclusions about information in order to create new knowledge. As leaders, direct or indirect (Gardner), they will deliberate in order to shape decisions affecting an organization’s future. Students will benefit from seeing wikis, blogs, and other digital collaborative mechanisms as new forms of an established process of deliberation, and we will all benefit if we can help them recognize and overcome the possible impediments to deliberations that yield successful outcomes.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I thank Professor Diane C. Tucker, Ph.D., Director of the Science and Technology Honors Program at the University of Alabama at Birmingham and Professor in the Department of Psychology at UAB, for her helpful suggestions on this essay.

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