The loss of knowledge in the information age

Jürgen Mittelstrass
Department of Philosophy, University of Konstanz, Germany

At first sight it might seem as though the dream of the ‘enlightenment’ has become reality. A society begins to conceive of itself as a knowledge society, connecting its concept of knowledge with the concept of information, no longer with tradition and authority, and basing wisdom in knowledge again. Equally, the idea that only the scientific consciousness can be truly ‘gebildet’ or educated seems to gain reality. Education in the sense of ‘Bildung’ has always been the expression of wisdom, and most convincingly so where wisdom has remained close to knowledge, including scientific knowledge. In the idea of the knowledge society, the unity of information, knowledge and wisdom seems finally to have been accomplished.

That appears true at first sight. A second look might prove more sobering.

Let us begin with information and the concept of an information society. Information might get knowledge and society going, but it is not as a consequence better knowledge. The expression ‘information society’ designates a form of a society or economy in which the production, storage, processing, exchange, distribution, and the use of information and knowledge in the form of data, including ever-developing technical means of interactive communication, are playing an increasingly dominant role. Important elements of this development are:

- Technology (for instance, the construction and extension of information networks and the development of user-friendly man-machine interfaces)
- Economics (for instance, in the production and service industries, or ‘multimedia’)
- The working environment (for instance, in the way entire professional fields change, and new ways of working, such as working from home, develop)
- Cultural forms of society (for instance, in the areas of education and the environment).

Essential to all of this is that an information society remains a democratic society politically, that economically it improves its economic performance significantly and that viewed culturally it becomes a knowledge society with a corresponding culture of information and media. The last point, the conversion of an information society into a knowledge society, is not just terminologically, but also epistemologically an essential question, even if one should beware of confusing the particular with the general. The way the form of rationality of the modern world will develop will, in the last instance, depend on how it is answered. For a detailed analysis see [1].

1Email: Juergen.Mittelstrass@uni-konstanz.de
The information world today promises a paradisiacal realm of knowledge without cumbersome learning processes. Its teaching is that we all should turn from knowledge dwarfs to information giants. In such a world, metaphorically speaking, in the symbiosis of computer screen and head, the distinction between knowledge and information fades. Thus we often (and thoughtlessly) talk of information as if it were already the whole of knowledge, and in so doing overlook the fact that information is the manner or way knowledge becomes portable, that is, a form of communication, and not an (independent) form of knowledge. One might get the misleading impression that knowledge generates itself in the form of information, and that with the concept of information a new concept of knowledge has emerged, one indeed opposed to the older concepts of knowledge, the only correct one. Thus the ability to build up knowledge by oneself is replaced by the ability to process information together with trust in the fact that the information is ‘accurate’. Indeed, it makes little sense to play the sceptic in front of the computer screen. One has to believe in information if one is not able to examine its knowledge, the knowledge transported in that piece of information. Just this examination has until now been constitutive for the concept of knowledge formation: only a knowing person is able to acquire knowledge, knowledge presupposes the knowledgeable person.

In this respect it is of essential importance to distinguish very carefully between knowledge based in an expertise that has been acquired and may produce knowledge on its own, and knowledge that is merely received and simply accepted and processed. Information technologies are, to put it simply, ‘calculating’ encyclopaedias, not more, but not less either. Whoever ‘uses’ or ‘applies’ them needs to know what he/she is getting involved with, not by distrusting information technologies, but by connecting information with his own knowledge. Once again: there is no point in playing the sceptic in front of the computer screen, but it should be the right head in front of the screen. Besides, in the medium of information, knowledge and opinion become indistinguishable. Opinion is articulated in information just as is knowledge; the ‘informed’ himself does not know whether he is living in a world of knowledge or in a world of opinion. To put it even more clearly: whenever the distinction between knowledge and opinion, when either is taking the form of information, is not made at all or obscured, in a surprising manner a niche for a new stupidity is opened, though a stupidity at a high level. It only really reveals itself to those urging the re-establishment of the original knowledge world, and, besides that, does not attract any attention precisely because it is particularly successful from the technological point of view.

However, there is something further at issue here, namely to render conspicuous the true dynamic of an information world that understands itself as a knowledge world. This dynamic does not just find expression in the fact that we live with more information around us than we can process, but also in the fact that the structures of knowledge in our world are really changing. Floating on the floods of information, we are drifting away from the sources of true knowledge. And in this development, the political principle of ‘divide and rule’ (divide et impera) also seems to become a principle of knowledge. I mean the increasing particularization of knowledge, which is in a strange opposition to the ‘techno-
The loss of knowledge in the information age

logical’ integration of knowledge. This integration does not, as one might expect, lead to a new (or old) unity of the universally oriented knower, but to the creation of the expert. The information world is an expert world; it is ruled not by the Leibnizian Monad, in which also in matters of knowledge a universe is intended to be mirrored, but by the specialist, in whom almost nothing or (freely adapting Schiller) a divided world is mirrored. Who knows more-and-more of less-and-less has reached the flipside of universality; he is looking for it in the detail that has for him now become the whole. However, relative to the concept of a knowledge society this cannot possibly work out. Where an information world turns into an expert world, the (old) ideal of the unity of knowledge, even when still pursued ‘technologically’, has lost its point socially. The division of knowledge in the categories of universality and professionalism, that is, in a form of responsibility for the whole and its parts (or some parts), is fading. The information world is serving the knowledge world, but it is no longer representing it.

Furthermore, it is not just the forms of information, but also the forms of media that are merging with each other. The consequences of this are not just information-theoretic and cultural in general, but, for instance, they also affect our theory of democracy again. Freedom of expression, both lived, written and demonstrated, the heart of democracy, lives off the institutional variety and the (mutual) independence of its supporting institutions. Whenever monopolies begin to form, as may be observed in many cases today, the media are on the verge of turning into their own opposites, as far as the theory of democracy is concerned: they no longer mirror the variety of opinions but only themselves, or rather those interests which keep the game of opinion, power and business running. After all, the media democracy that is often appealed to, and at times joyfully instrumentalized, is at also times looked upon with suspicion and only serves democracy by creating or preserving independencies. However, the Zeitgeist seems to think differently, increasingly cultivating its love of the tabloid media and beginning to neglect its intellectual heritage, which once embellished the modern civil society. Information serving knowledge? Far from it.

Something further is happening where forms of information and media are fusing: time threatens to disappear. Historically, the first ways of speaking of time were natural forms, such as summer and winter, day and night, youth and old age and the corresponding life forms. Then came clocks, first of the analogue kind, simulating the course of the sun, in other words again something natural, then of the digital kind, not simulating anything at all, but just counting. In its modern forms, together with the digital, the merging of different forms of life, agency and time takes place with the result being the dominion of simultaneity. We write, read, calculate, make phone calls, take pictures, send faxes and watch films not just with one and the same machine, but often even simultaneously, watching films while the stock market news is also on display, shopping, transferring money and wandering, as far as the screen goes, through foreign continents. The virtual, driven by the digital and the fusion of different forms of media (and formats of media), is not just abolishing reality or making it look irrelevant, but also is doing the same for space and time. Is this the knowledge world we are looking for and which will lead us to wisdom?
Let us not forget that wisdom and orientation belong together, and that an information world by itself is not yet an orientation world, at least not when a world orienting life, both individual and social life, is at issue. Quite to the contrary, in the common superficial talk of information, the information world is trying to take the place of an orientation world. And the same is true for a knowledge world. In other words: it is important to realise that information in the strict sense does not give orientation, but that it does belong to the preconditions or foundations of orientation. Decisive for this stipulation is that information knowledge is, first of all, knowledge of facts, that is, knowledge about what is the case. Orientation knowledge (or ‘socratic knowledge’), by contrast, may be defined as knowledge of aims and purposes, that is, as knowledge of what (justifiably) ought to be the case. Put differently again, it illustrates the ‘locus’ of information knowledge in the system of knowledge: information knowledge is part of a ‘Homo faber’-knowledge and serves orientation (‘socratic’) knowledge.

These terminological distinctions make it clear that the appeal to an information society, and the same is true for a knowledge society, comes to nothing unless an oriented society, and not just an informed one, is also intended with that term. Consequently, how orientation knowledge may be achieved is not a question that can be answered with further information knowledge. In other words: the information world is not an orientation world, even if in rational cultures every orientation world (increasingly) needs to contain elements of information knowledge.

Thus the reference to an expert world also makes clear that the information world is an expression of the modern world’s tendency to appropriate everything, when it begins to dominate the being and consciousness of its subjects. Its culture, incidentally, and philosophy and the arts always knew this, is called construction, construction of reality, as well as of consciousness, which in the medium of information is relating to this reality. Where Homo faber, the man as craftsman, designer and engineer rules, everything becomes a construction in this sense, and a world for which everything is technically feasible also captures, under the banner of technological change (which is always also cultural change), science and the forms of knowledge. Let us take care that in hearing the songs of the sirens we do not forget that the future of modern society, and with it that of the modern world, is not just an information society, but, understood in the demanding sense, is really a knowledge society, a society that uses the new possibilities of communication and information technologies wisely and autonomously, that is without succumbing to the tendencies of taking on a life of its own and claiming authority that is inherent to all technology.

From information to knowledge? At the moment it rather looks as if information is trying to take the place of knowledge. The information society does not just believe itself to have the better concept of knowledge; it also believes itself to be the sought-after knowledge society already. From knowledge to wisdom? Which wisdom could that be, if its concept of knowledge is only that of information again? What if orientation, which is the heart of all wisdom, is orientation only within information worlds? If the path does not lead from information to wisdom, but on the contrary from wisdom (in the traditional sense) to information? Indeed, T.S. Eliot, who wrote long before information technology opened the gate to
an information society, moreover believing to dispose of the better concept of knowledge, asked justifiably:

“Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?” ([2], p. 157)

There are not any simple and straight paths between information, knowledge and wisdom. Whoever does not recognize this will lose knowledge and end up not with wisdom, but in a new, and dangerous, form of stupidity.

References