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Congressional Gridlock, Town Hall Vitriol...and the Information Environment

BY DENNIS M. MURPHY

Speed, access to news, connectivity... The information age, as Thomas Friedman likes to remind us, has made the world flat. From many perspectives, that's good news. You can access news from anywhere, at any time with a click of a mouse. You have the capability to watch literally hundreds of television channels, in multiple languages from the comfort of your couch. You can listen to rock, jazz, metal or classical music without interruption driving from coast to coast...or you can listen to talk radio a mind-numbing 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. And the future will only bring more capability, more options, and more information.

With more access to information, you can easily become more informed. It follows that you can then better engage in national dialog. Your decisions will be borne of the multi-dimensional research that the plethora of information at your fingertips enables.... But, why is it then, that apparently a rather significant number of Americans believe that Barack Obama is not a U.S. citizen? Why is it that Lindsay and Paris get so much ink (or is it electrons) that we know them by their first names, and a Presidential candidate used them in election ads?

Information access is a two-edged sword. Newspapers, which once competed for knowledge as a scarce resource, today compete for a new scarce resource: the readers' (or listeners' in the case of broadcast media) attention. Perhaps that is why increasing numbers of young adults turn to the Comedy Channel's "The Daily Show" for their news. Jon Stewart, the show's host, scoffs at this, but his ratings are such that politicians, celebrities and even military leaders clamor to be his guests. Of course in an environment where the speed of breaking news means viewership, and thus advertising dollars, accuracy is sometimes sacrificed as well.

What this all means is that while massive amounts of information can provide the opportunity to broaden and expand thought, it also can, and does, overwhelm people already constrained by time as they juggle the daily requirements of life. As a result, they filter the information they consume based on personal leanings and biases. So, maybe you watch Fox, but if you do you probably don't watch CNN and you likely don't think of flipping to BBC America. Maybe you read the New York Times, but you probably don't read the New York Post. If you listen to Rush Limbaugh, you'd never dream of listening to Rachel Maddow. If you get the news it's likely only the news that reinforces your own personal value set...and that's dangerous. It results in a polarized nation, congressional gridlock and vitriol on both sides that go way beyond the bounds of decent human discourse. Just witness recent town hall meetings on the health care issue to get a sense of this problem.

We need to change this, and it needs to begin with our children who are watching it evolve. Karl Fisch, a high school technology teacher in Colorado, developed what has become a very popular presentation to expose his fellow teachers to the world their students will face in the future. Fisch notes, "The top 10 in-demand jobs in 2010 didn't exist in 2004. We are currently preparing students for jobs that don't yet exist...using technologies that haven't been

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invented...in order to solve problems we don't even know are problems yet." What this means is that teaching kids "how" to think becomes as important as teaching them "what" to think. And, interestingly, getting at "how" to think may put us on the path of dealing with information overload and its associated problems.

We need to educate "strategic children," and the essence of having a strategic outlook is the ability to think critically. Dr. Steve Gerras describes critical thinking as "the deliberate, conscious and appropriate application of reflective skepticism." Teachers must encourage dialog, (dialog is speaking *and* listening), consider, in civil discourse, both sides of an argument, reward debate, and require multiple sources of information for student products. Parents have a role as well. Naturally parents pass on a value set to their children based on their own strongly developed core beliefs. There is nothing wrong with that. But the way parents go about it can have significant impact on the way their children view the world. Will they listen...or just talk? Will they consider opposing views...or dismiss them out of hand? Will they be prepared to back up their positions with facts...or use emotionally vacuous rhetoric?

Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "If you resist reading what you disagree with, how will you ever acquire deeper insights into what you believe? The things most worth reading are precisely those that challenge our convictions." Wise words. If we heed them perhaps we can ensure the next generation takes advantage of the information environment, while avoiding the pitfalls that it portends.

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