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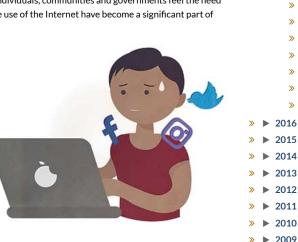
# The Internet and free learning

**Prakash Iyer**

*Why do people want to be "on the Internet?" One of the main reasons is simple freedom. The Internet is a rare example of a true, modern, functional anarchy. There is no "Internet Inc." There are no official censors, no bosses, no board of directors, no stockholders. In principle, any node can speak as a peer to any other node, as long as it obeys the rules of the TCP/IP protocols, which are strictly technical, not social or political. – Bruce Sterling in "The magazine of fantasy and science fiction" February 1993.*

Sterling's quote gives us a glimpse into the initial days of the Internet and what people thought the Internet offers them. The Internet signified freedom for two reasons: first, freedom to communicate in the public domain for which we had fewer avenues before. Second, the rules governing the Internet are strictly technical, not social or political. This implies that the Internet is free and unbiased.

Since then, the Internet and internet applications have transformed into pervasive technology. It has entered homes and transformed lives in ways which only fantasy and science fiction writers imagined a few decades ago. Individuals, communities and governments feel the need to regulate and control this virtual world. It is not surprising then that debates on the use of the Internet have become a significant part of the educational discourse.

One success of the Internet constantly impressed upon educators is how it has democratized access to information for all groups of people including children. Given this is the state of affairs, technology enthusiasts recommend a paradigm shift in teaching and learning. They say, the Internet is a richer and better replacement to textbooks and to some extent teacher's responsibilities. Proponents of this position provide two reasons for introducing Internet-based pedagogy. First, the Internet provides access to vast amounts of information that textbooks will not be able to provide. Second, the Internet is a way of educating a child in a free manner where the child is no longer tied to or subservient to a teacher or a textbook. They are implying that teachers should play a lesser role in teaching because teachers end up doling out conclusions that students consume whereas the Internet does not do that. It is unbiased in this sense. They describe learning as "owning the process of finding information and exercising choice in believing in it, rather than merely receiving beliefs from the teacher."

They say teachers should only provide access to information and create a free learning environment.

But in reality, while the Internet may be a good replacement for textbooks, its richness and free access creates more problems for pedagogy; and in fact it makes the role of a teacher more complex.

**Earning the right to confidence**

While Internet based pedagogy seems valuable and attractive, it glosses over a necessary condition for learning – *"earning the Right to Confidence in Belief"* (Scheffler). Learning necessarily involves formation of beliefs, and we should have earned the confidence in our belief. This implies we should have assessed the reasons for believing in something and convinced ourselves of it. The learner has to go through an important step between getting information and forming belief – earn the right to confidence in believing. The mere fact that we find information ourselves does not amount to being confident in believing.

Finding information from the Internet involves effort. Regular Internet users develop the skill to craft keywords and search criteria, the ability to scan through the numerous links that search engines list, look for relevant, reliable (usually familiar) links, speed-reading text and scanning through images to locate the information we need. *"I checked on the Internet, it is true."* is a common refrain in daily conversations. People even refer to *"online research"* as if it is a reliable research method.

The ability to put all this effort leads us to think that we have earned the right to be confident in believing. This claim rests on the assumption that search engines use unbiased algorithms. So, if I am using an algorithm to get information, then I own the information and have the right to form a belief about it.

**Searching the Internet**
But that is not how things actually are. There is bias embedded in the entire process of finding things on the Internet. Search engines search sites that are publicly available. The Internet is not a monolith, but a mechanism to access websites that might have been created for

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different purposes and they contain information in different forms. Through blogs people create an identity for themselves to be seen and appreciated by others. Company owned websites proffer information along with their products, often with the intention of marketing their products. Well-meaning people put up information on websites but quite often their knowledge about an issue is limited and possibly incorrect. Among all this are websites dedicated to knowledge in a particular domain maintained by people with knowledge in that area. How does one differentiate between these sites and judge what is true and what is not?

Search engines sort all these kinds of sites in order of relevance. Relevance is determined based on the words we search for appearing as keywords in a site. An algorithm is not capable of judging the completeness of information or of its truth. So, it is left to us to assess the truth of the content offered to us. But the order in which the sites appear influences our assessment of truth in significant ways. Some people specialize in Search Engine Optimization (SEO). Their job is to write content in a way that any search engine would identify keywords on their site and are searched and place a link to their site high on its list when those keywords are searched. There is a level of manipulation at this very step. The Internet, by design, leads us to popular opinion rather than truth by showing popular sites containing your keywords on top implying that these are the ones we really need.

A learner must be able to differentiate between the kinds of sites, assess their truth value and then arrive at a belief. Unless a learner knows the criteria for believing something, uses these criteria to assess the information, ascertains reasons for believing or not believing and in the process separates popular opinion from truth, she is not justified in believing what she does. She has not learnt.

The Internet might be definitely an improvement over most textbooks, in that it provides diverse sources of information and is more likely to present diverse and sometimes divergent views. However, providing diverse information alone does not resolve the need for a learner to earn confidence in belief. This requires additional effort on the part of the teacher to clarify the criteria based on which one believes information the learner gets from various websites. Without a teacher there is a huge risk that learners might presume mere popular opinion to be truth.

### The technological trap?
One might say this problem can be solved by making the learner aware of the difference between truth and popular opinion, and caution her to keep this distinction in mind when she uses the Internet. Is this all that needs to be done? No. There is a subtler problem that makes it difficult for us to employ this caution easily.

The urge to create technology, to use tools and machines is second nature to humans. We seek technology in some form or the other in all contexts. Technological thinking changes the way we see the world and everything around us. When we see a tree, we see it as a means to provide shade, as firewood, furniture. "The tree", Heidegger says, "reveals itself to us as *standing-reserve*." Needless to say, this applies to everything we see around us – a river, a horse, a stone. We perceive objects as things that *could be* transformed to something else and as means to ends.

But it does not end here, something happens to us too. When we see a tree as a source of firewood, it also poses a challenge on us to find ways of changing the tree into firewood. We become subordinate to the *standing-reserve* such that we now have to find a way to transform the standing-reserve into a product. Does something similar happen in the case of the Internet or internet applications?



We see the Internet as a source of information. And when we do that, it also poses a demand on us to accept the information it gives us. It is unusual for us not to accept information we get on the Internet. Sometimes we are surprised we did not find something after a long search on the Internet. It seems to us that it is our fault that we could not find it. We become subordinate to the Internet in this manner.

Having a question, and not *Googling* for an answer is now considered a travesty. We are already convinced we can find an answer on the Internet. In this state of subordination, the first few links that the search engine lists present themselves as containing the answer we want. We unthinkingly privilege these first few sites. Technology gains control over us in this manner.

When we access the Internet for information, we are being positioned as someone capable of finding stuff from the Internet. Our judgment is influenced by the way we are expected to perform. If we do not find something using a particular keyword, we often change the keyword itself.

Moreover using the Internet is valued for other things like speed, brevity, efficiency, which may result in devaluing or negating contemplation and dialogue. Applications start influencing the criteria based on which we judge truth.

Internet applications are designed based on a model of technological humans that we become conditioned to accept its influences in many other ways. An algorithm driven search engine leads you to believe information we get is true. Brief 140 character tweeted messages lend the impression of precision, but in actuality we hear only claims with no explanation or justification and form opinions about people based on these tweets. Social media assume our need for recognition and gently and sometimes forcefully form us in a certain way by channelling certain kind of opportunities for communication.

### The role of a teacher
The subordination to technology and the conflation of popular opinion and truth pose critical problems to the idea of truth and learning. Mere possession of information becomes learning, violating the idea of education.

Does this mean the Internet is dangerous for education and should be avoided? Not at all. These problems are reasons why the Internet has to be brought into the classroom. The Internet exposes us to a world larger, richer and more diverse than we would otherwise have access

to. Educators need to explicitly use the Internet in the teaching-learning process to familiarize children with it and to teach children how to assess sources of information, differentiate between merely believing and earning the right to confidence in believing, observe the effect the Internet and social media has on oneself, learn to distance themselves from this effect and remembering that the Internet, like the textbook, is a repository of information that needs to be assessed, evaluated and not just consumed.

Learning the skills to use the Internet is no big deal really, anyone learns it on their own, even children. Teachers have to help children make a distinction between truth on the one hand and opinions, entertainment, socializing and conditioning on the other. Only another human being with knowledge can help children weed opinions away from truth. Schools and the teacher have the more difficult responsibility of maintaining integrity of learning spaces and focus on morally defensible and epistemically valuable use of the Internet, or any source of information technological progress is bound to throw our way.

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