Chapter 1
Collective Narrative Expertise and the Narbs of Social Media

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ABSTRACT

A fundamental epistemological question that has been the focus of much deliberation over time is: how do we know what we know? One of the answers to this question has been found in the theories of narrative asserting that humans learn through stories, ranging from religious epics to personal anecdotes. The social media phenomenon offers a unique form of narration that utilizes "narbs," narrative bits that tell the stories of specific individuals who may be, but often are not, traditional experts. Yet, as a collection, these narbs could become the authoritative narrative about a particular issue where expertise is located in the collective. This chapter examines the theoretical basis of knowledge creation through narrative, and how the narbs of social media users are creating dynamic bodies of information. The chapter offers a lexicon for categorizing narbs and provides an analytical frame for examining them. The overall aim of this chapter is to demonstrate that interaction and new modes of gathering and disseminating information and knowledge in the digital environment require different and emergent expertise in narrative construction and interpretation.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important facets of most communities is the designation of an expert who adopts the role of a leader in the community by virtue of acquiring a specialized and esoteric knowledge about something. Ancient civilizations relied upon religious leaders as the source of information for moral issues; later, expertise moved into the

hands of those who could provide evidence for their knowledge by showing careful examination of a body of work. However, once a person or an institution has demonstrated expertise, it has been traditionally the case that it is then formally and institutionally credited; for an individual it could be the conferring of an academic degree—for instance, a doctoral degree recognizes and acknowledges expertise. Thereafter, what the individual states and does is traditionally considered trustworthy, authentic, and a source

of knowledge by non-experts because the status of expert has been established. For institutions, the accreditation could be earned through peer recognition where, for instance, one media outlet is considered to be the expert source of information because other experts have conferred that status on the particular outlet. Once the experts become available, having access to them becomes critical to the development and sustenance of communities and social systems because experts are expected to create and disseminate knowledge so that the amateur gains a portion of the knowledge and gets to "know" something. A child going to school is a quintessential traditional example of the interplay between expertise, creation, and dissemination of information. A child could say, "I know this because my teacher told me so," and in such a statement expertise is located in a trustworthy individual whose information is necessarily considered authentic. This system worked well because there were often few alternatives to what the expert disseminated as correct and trustworthy information. In this chapter, I call into question the sanguineness of this information and the power of traditional expertise as more people gain access to information delivered digitally.

Here I consider the question "How do we know what we know?" in the age of instantaneous access to information, with nearly 500 million people actively using a digital tool. The question, however, is not at all new, and an entire branch of philosophy—epistemology—focuses on the question of knowledge, how it is acquired, and how its authenticity is established. The purpose of this chapter is to consider how new digital processes are calling into question some of the accepted ways of knowing and gathering knowledge while complicating the ability to judge the reliability of the information that is considered to be knowledge. I aim to show that emerging knowledge sources could have an impact on the ways in which things are known. In particular, I focus on the ways in which micro-narratives, or narrative bits—abbreviated as "narbs"—can be

combined to create narratives that can serve as the mode that we now know, and that now coexist with the narratives offered by traditional expert individuals and institutions. The primary argument of this essay is that narbs begin to challenge expertise that has been established and acknowledged a priori. Narbs do not originate from people who have already been established as experts within the norms of a social and cultural system, yet by their very nature, as explained in this essay, they could call into question the normative experts—individuals and institutions—producing a crisis of expertise and eventually an epistemological concern. First, it is useful to briefly consider the question of epistemology and consider one accepted way of knowing.

MODES OF KNOWING AND TRADITIONAL EXPERTISE

In the traditional mode of producing, collating, and distributing information, expertise was often based on an epistemic capital, where the expert held a certain epistemic superiority that made his/her knowledge somehow better than other knowledge. This relationship between expertise and epistemology can be traced to the very meaning of epistemology. After it was introduced as a named area of study by Ferrier in the mid-1800s, the question of epistemology became connected with the notion of modernity where the objective of knowing was increasingly connected with the pursuit of a singular and unambiguous truth about any matter. Much of the endeavor of epistemology has been to consider the ways in which truth, belief, and justification work together in relation to any phenomenon so that eventually an approximate true knowledge is obtained about a phenomenon. It is the expert, in enthusiastic pursuit of the truth, who then becomes the keeper and disseminator of the knowledge, earning the epistemic capital because s/he followed an accepted mode of gathering the knowledge. Indeed, the process of training

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