

Chapter 5

Should we Take Disintermediation in Higher Education Seriously? Expertise, Knowledge Brokering, and Knowledge Translation in the Age of Disintermediation

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ABSTRACT

Disintermediation based on digital technology has transformed different environments, including banking, commerce, media, education, and knowledge management. The spread of social software applications and digital media in general has given rise to new models of knowledge production and distribution in higher education. This chapter redefines higher education institutions and academic experts based on these changes. The chapter discusses the diffusion of disintermediation practices in higher education and proposes new categories, such as knowledge brokering, knowledge networking, and knowledge translation, to map a new environment that promotes disintermediation, innovation, and openness. Beyond the prophecies announcing the “death of the university,” the authors suggest new agents, actions, and transactions that are useful for envisaging the higher education institutions of the new century.

INTRODUCTION

The spread of digital technology and the emergence of a network society (Castells, 1996) have changed the role of the institutions that have traditionally been considered the unique providers of “legitimate” knowledge. The diffusion of the World Wide Web has greatly expanded the generation of new models of knowledge production and distribution. Two of the main dimensions that have affected the transformations of knowledge can be labeled as new models of:

1. **Knowledge Production:** E-science, online education, distributed R&D, open innovation, peer-based production, online encyclopedias, user-generated contents, etc.
2. **Knowledge Distribution:** Digital print on demand, e-journals, open repositories, Creative Commons licenses, academic podcasting initiatives, etc.

These new means of knowledge production and distribution are challenging the traditional intermediated academic practices and even the role of those considered to be the “experts” in education (professors, researchers, and education managers). As Jarvis (2009, p. 215) states, “if students could take courses from anywhere, a marketplace of instruction would emerge that should lead the best to rise: the aggregated university.”

In this context it is important to analyze the appearance of *disintermediation* practices in higher education. Disintermediation is essentially “cutting out the middleman” in the production/distribution/consumption chain. Traditional professions like real estate agents, publishers, and journalists, as well as service providers in areas like travel agencies and video rental, have already faced this dilemma. Now the role of education experts (teachers, professors, researchers, education managers, etc.) is being directly affected by disintermediation. It is not important whether we consider “expertise” to be a characteristic of

individuals or a socially constructed institutional process. At first glance, disintermediation seems to make highly specialized professionals obsolete. Those who once held the position of renowned expert are currently witnessing a change in their hierarchy; now they need to flatter, reshape, or share their privileges with other agents or entities.

In this chapter we explore questions such as:

- Is it possible to imagine a radical disintermediation of educational processes—that is, the disappearance of mediating higher education institutions?
- How is the redefinition of *knowledge production* and *knowledge distribution* affecting the role of higher education institutions and experts?
- Will the rapid evolution of digital technologies lead to a crisis for Higher Education institutions? How have the roles of the formal education actors (educators, students, researchers, managers, etc.) been modified?
- How can new categories such as *knowledge brokering* or *knowledge translation* help us to map a new territory full of proposals that promote disintermediation, innovation, and openness in higher education?

The issues raised in this chapter are taken from the experience of Western universities, particularly the “Latin” and “Anglo-Saxon” institutional models. There are significant differences between these two models in terms of hierarchy, tradition, funding sources, methodology, and level of internationalization; however, it is interesting to observe that the disintermediation phenomenon is observed in both of them. Rather than exploring the differences or similarities between these kinds of universities, the aim of this work is to explore and better understand how disintermediation is reshaping the role of the agents and mechanisms that support higher education in the 21st century.

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