Knowledge Tourism

G. Anthony Gorry, Rice University, Texas USA.

ABSTRACT:

In permeating our lives, digital technology has changed not only how we know, but also what we deem worth knowing. We have become tourists in the burgeoning electronic realm of knowledge, returning from our forays with snippets of knowledge as souvenirs of our travels. Within businesses, this way of knowing about the world by cobbling together diverse pieces of understanding threatens to foster organizational learning that is increasingly broad but increasingly shallow. Businesses should counter this threat by retaining some traditional guideposts to learning in their knowledge management systems as these systems extend into social networks on the Internet.

Keywords: *Knowledge, Learning, Internet, Knowledge management*

The Tourist And The Camera

Three decades ago, Susan Sontag argued that the camera fostered tourism by easing encounters in which people would otherwise feel insecure. (Sontag, 1977) Unsure of how to respond to foreignness, the tourist can seek comfort in the photogenic. Situated between the traveler and the place, the camera mediates experiences, certifying some and refusing others. What the lens frames may be remembered; what it elides, lost or forgotten. An accumulation of photographs represents a world recast by technology.

At the time Sontag published her essay, I was a decade into an academic career in which I divided my time between artificial intelligence and management. Ambitions in artificial intelligence were grand, but early computers were puny, so people and machines met only in experimental settings. Later when similarly grand aspirations motivated the push of more powerful computers into businesses, the interplay of machines with people was extensive, and the discipline they demanded far-reaching. As a teacher and consultant, I was enthusiastic about the benefits of computing for organizations and society generally and remain so today, but over the years, I have found myself thinking more and more about the cost as well. Who pays that price and in what coin? Now that computing, seemingly overnight, has permeated our lives, questions of gain and loss are even more salient. Lately, I have found in Sontag's musings on the camera an interesting perspective on these questions, particularly in regard to knowledge and its management.

The computer, of course, has bestowed many benefits on businesses. It has enabled them to escape the containment of bricks and mortar through information flows between them and their suppliers, partners, and distributors. Within companies, digital

technology supports efforts to release knowledge from the manuals, reports, and books that held it for so long and to share it across organizational boundaries. This fluidity has helped businesses know what they know and know it in a timely way (O'Dell & Huber, 2011). To obtain these benefits, however, we have changed some of our ideas about knowledge, and therein lies a cost. At home and in the workplace, employees are increasingly devoted to what I call here knowledge tourism. Business leaders, particularly those concerned with knowledge management, should be attuned to this attachment, because it is changing not only how workers know, but also what they deem worth knowing.

Knowledge Tourism

While the camera sent people traveling to foreign lands by ship and plane, the computer encourages us to tour a burgeoning electronic world where the stubborn physicality of our ordinary lives no longer limits the range of our travel. Borne by machines that traffic in bits alone, we move through a realm where the calculus of time and distance has been radically transformed. The Internet, which in its early years was said to be an information highway, has proved a far grander thoroughfare than was then foreseen. As anticipated, we frequent stores of information along its pathways, but the scope and scale of these resources far exceed those previously imagined. Unforeseen was an Internet teeming with social interaction, and unexpected was the proliferation of digital devices that at work, home and play give us continuous access to this parallel world within which are increasingly found the tracks of modern life. Along these paths, the computer acts as a kind of camera, mediating our experiences and easing our engagement with the demanding, the uncomfortable, the strange and the unruly. It offers instead the congenial from which we gather the fragments of information that become the souvenirs of our travels. Like the collecting of photographs, the assembling of these fragments has become a way to collect the world.

Not so long ago, the world of knowledge was far more circumscribed. Bookstores and library stacks, newspapers, radio stations and a few television channels offered well worn paths to information laid down in accord with a modest variety of perspectives and opinions. Inside companies, knowledge management systems similarly structured their offerings. Often moderators, experts or librarians were the arbiters of what was worth knowing and the guides to its access and use. Technology has now remade the topography of knowledge and granted us visas to travel freely over it. Places once dispersed and out of reach are now close at hand; events once separated by time or mental space are now simultaneous. Wherever we are, in the office, in the plant, on the road, or at home, a computer screen opens into a bookstore far grander than the one to which we used to walk; into a library not on campus or in the company, but across an ocean; into the midst of a new repository far larger than either. Historical dates, business reports, maps, recipes, colleagues or potential contacts, news stories, music, videos—search engines have made whatever we seek readily available in what Kelly calls an "Eden of everything" (Kelly, 2006). No wonder that we spend so much time there. No wonder that at work and at home, we have become tourists on its electronic byways.

In this magical garden, however, technology has loosened clusters of knowledge, which formerly explained facts or otherwise made sense of aspects of the world. Once a printed text was the quintessential repository and now digital technology cuts pages from books and snips words from pages. Fragments of the work of a novelist, a reporter or an analyst, torn from their anchors and reworked by others, are cast into a flood of opinion, speculation, fear, fantasy and desire. Adding to the tide are innumerable videos, which respond to a rapidly growing number of tourists who want to be shown rather than told.

This is a world in which the crowd has claimed authority. Everyone is a potential publisher, commentator, or broadcaster, and every analysis, critique, or rendition is but a click away. Self-appointed, variously qualified experts promise to lift the weight of uncertainty, resolve problems or bolster wavering opinions. Yet this radical egalitarianism holds a certain appeal for knowledge management. Perhaps much of a company's knowledge can be called forth by a sort of organizational Wikipedia constructed by eager contributors, editors, and critics emerging from the workforce. Even a modest development along this line can open the door to external social networks, which may prove beneficial to the company.

However, like so many rushing about in the Eden of everything, impelled by the pressures of life, workers may adopt new attitudes about knowledge and knowing. Like the traveler who favors the photogenic church over the historical one, the knowledge tourist is attracted to the surface of knowledge rather than its gnarly infrastructure. A quick search produces a page of links, signposts pointing to different destinations where the desired information might be found. Sometimes the trip is short, one more hop to a web page with someone's congenial offering of the information sought. Another time, a quick jump reveals a complexity that sends the traveler off in search of another, more appealing presentation of the material. Although such a trip recalls the often-parodied rush of the traveler who visits six European cities in seven days or perhaps seven in six, information tourists exult in their travel. So many places to visit; so many surprises. Daily, hourly, even minute-by-minute, we are all glad for our easy access to the riches of this Eden of everything. But repeated computer-mediated forays for information are changing habits of perception. Jacoby compares us to birds of prey looking for their next meal, swooping around with an eye out for easy pickings (Jacoby, 2008). We collect a few morsels of knowledge here and there. What more there might be to know, like what lies behind the facade of a photographed church, remains unnoticed, unlearned. A sense of history and context are often prominent casualties of the scramble to keep up with the present.

The touring worker may experience a certain euphoria, thinking that all that one needs to know can be learned by cobbling together fragments from here and there. But the disconcerting ease of creating snippets of information and the authority so often imputed to the computer produce a tenuous way of knowing. Sontag said photography seems to enable our knowing the world, if we accept it as the camera records it. True understanding, however, emerges from not accepting the world as it appears (Sontag, 1977). Today, Jacoby frets that the "greater accessibility of information through computers and the Internet serves to foster the illusion that to retrieve words and numbers with the click of a mouse also confers the ability to judge whether those

words and numbers represent truth, lies, or something in between." (Jacoby, 2008, p. xviii)

This is a valid and vital concern for those who would enhance the sharing of knowledge and best practice in companies. Technology has greatly facilitated their work, and understandably they eagerly anticipate its further development. But they should be attentive to the ways in which workers are being changed by the digital tools to which they are so devoted. Here is a virtue of looking back on the interplay of the camera, tourism and the quest for the photogenic. It suggests some of the ways in which digital technology interposed between workers and the world alters not only what they know, but the ways in which they know as well. We welcomed the camera. With it we could capture not just images of foreign places, but pictures from everyday life as well. Through photographs and now video, we share our experiences and sustain our memories of them. But there is little doubt that the possession of a camera induces a search for the photogenic, and the proliferation of digital devices has broadened and intensified this quest. It is common to see parents avidly recording their children's activities, trading direct experiences for later replays on screens at home. In a sense, ubiquitous digital cameras, computers of course, are making us tourists in our own lives.

We also welcomed the computer, which ushered us into a new world. I, for one, am still astonished by the amount of information, the number of facts, which can be got in my frequent forays there. But we make our tools, and then our tools make us. Where the camera calls for the photogenic, the computer screen calls for the congenial. Where the camera elevates image over experience, the computer promotes synopsis over exposition. Each technology inclines its user to view the world as a mélange of fragments. Yet for all its appeal and apparent authority, such a view may in fact diminish understanding.

Guiding the Knowledge Tourist

Opinions about life in the Eden of everything are divided. Some people are distressed. Some, while welcoming the powers that computing grants, acknowledge that these gifts have come at a cost. But a great many, particularly the young, are exhilarated by the prospects. They already live much, if not most of their lives in that magical garden. Enthusiasts increasingly populate the workplace. And, of course, it is over its electronic pathways that businesses commonly share information.

Knowledge management efforts are transplanting knowledge to cyberspace to facilitate its sharing and reuse. Such a move must be undertaken with care, because knowledge in the workplace often moves from one person to another through discussion, debate and reflection. As knowledge management practitioners know, when understanding is harvested from the setting in which it has grown, it may be diminished by the excision. It moves to cyberspace without its creators, those who can best provide nuance and context for its transfer and use. What is known but not easily articulated may have been cast aside and with it what I called above the unruliness of true knowledge. In the world of knowledge tourists, however, this problem is exacerbated. In their haste to keep up with the speed of work and life generally,

workers may cobble together only congenial fragments, which they mistake for mastery of the underlying knowledge. The result is likely to be organizational learning that is increasingly broad, but increasingly shallow.

Herein lies a challenge for knowledge management practitioners and their systems. Like characters in online video games that now enthrall so many, workers have acquired remarkable powers among which is the ability to wander far and wide in a previously unimagined world of information. Knowledge management systems that encompass social networking often encourage such forays. As digital technology continues its advance, workers' intimacy with it will certainly deepen, and new habits of thought will predominate in the workplace. Even if we acknowledge some of the unhappy effects of the camera on our perception of the world, we would not put it aside. Nor would reservations about its effects on learning and knowing dampen the widespread enthusiasm of businesses for the computer. They may be quite willing to leave behind older ways of obtaining and sharing knowledge in order to spread it more rapidly and widely in their organizations. But if those who receive that knowledge follow their inclinations to snip bits and pieces that are most readily available or easily understood, if they cobble together what is but a semblance of knowledge, the business will not be well served. Those who nourish knowledge management programs ought to preserve some of the older ways of guiding seekers to what they need to know. How to do this is uncertain, but doing it is important. Once the tacit knowledge that permeates the workplace seemed beyond the reach of knowledge management, but effort and experiment brought much within its grasp. The prospect of anchoring more formal, more traditional guideposts to knowledge in the tumultuous Garden of everything may seem daunting. But each company, in its own way, to serve its own purposes, can do so. Each must first, however, recognize the importance of such guidance for its workers and for the development of its intellectual capital.

References

Jacoby, S. (2008). *The Age of American Unreason.* New York: Pantheon Books.

Kelly, K. (2006). "Scan this Book". New York Times, May 15, 2006.

O'Dell, C. & Hubert, C. (2011). *The New Edge in Knowledge: How Knowledge Management Is Changing the Way We Do Business.* New York: Wiley.

Sontag, S. (1977). *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

Author the Author:

G. Anthony Gorry is the Friedkin Chair of Management and Professor of Computer Science at Rice University in Houston, Texas where he is also the Director of the Center for Technology in Teaching and Learning. He is an Adjunct Professor of Neuroscience at Baylor College of Medicine and a director of the W. M. Keck Center for Interdisciplinary Bioscience Training, a collaborative program of six institutions in the Greater Houston area.

Dr. Gorry has consulted for many companies and institutions on the strategic use of information technology and knowledge management. He can be reached: 350 McNair Hall, Rice University, 6100 Main Street, Houston TX 77005 USA; Tel: 713.348.6054; Email: tony@rice.edu