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 knowl-
dge 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 ac-

MODOES 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 epistemetic superiority that made 
his/her knowledge somehow better than other 
knowledge. This relationship between expertise 
and epistemology can be traced to the very mean-
ing 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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