

# Leisure Reflections [No. 66] by Robert A. Stebbins

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## Counteracting Ignorance: The Liberal Arts Hobbies as Cure

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An ignoramus, or ignorant person, lacks useful factual knowledge in a particular area of life, be that health, work, politics, current events, religion, and the like. *Useful* knowledge helps its holder understand and reach goals in the area of interest. *Factual* knowledge is true; it is not misinformation or disinformation, which is the stock and trade of propaganda wherever it is disseminated.<sup>[1]</sup> The opposite of factual knowledge is the *lie*, which is a willfully unsubstantiated view of an aspect of reality that is claimed to be true, or factual.

Frequently, however, many knowledge-based statements are neither clearly factual nor clearly fictitious. Put otherwise, such statements are essentially hypotheses. Some of them lack enough sound confirmatory data to render them unequivocally true, while others are seen as not factual because confirmatory data are non-existent, scarce, or weak. Weak data may nonetheless be scientific, in that they are inductively generated propositions based on exploratory research and grounded theory construction (Glaser & Strauss 1967, Stebbins 2001). The motive behind the generation of grounded hypotheses is to produce propositions that can eventually be supported in controlled confirmatory research.

Last, but not least, is the role of common sense in defining useful knowledge. Given the long history of the philosophical study of common sense – it dates to Plato — we work here with the modern definition supplied by the Shorter OED, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., 2002: “2b Ordinary or normal understanding, as possessed by all except the insane or the mentally handicapped.” By the way of example, note that, in many circles these days, it is common sense that politicians enter politics to serve their personal interests rather than those of their wider constituency (Stebbins, 2023). Tahoun and Lent (2019), for instance, offer some data supporting this popular idea, while the Pew Research Center (2015) provides American survey data

directly helping to confirm it. Consequently, common sense, in this instance, may be on the road to becoming an established fact.

### **Liberal Arts Hobbies**

The liberal arts hobbies are activities pursued by people eager to systematically acquire knowledge for its own sake (intrinsic knowledge). Many of these hobbyists search for information in a particular field of art, sport, cuisine, language, culture, history, science, philosophy, politics, or to a lesser extent, that of literature.<sup>[2]</sup> Furthermore, some of them are disposed to expand their knowledge still further through cultural tourism, documentary videos, television programs, and similar resources. The intellectually oriented followers of politics, although they may be committed to certain political parties or doctrines, nonetheless spend significant amounts of time (and possibly money) informing themselves in this area of life. To be a hobbyist here, one must pursue knowledge and understanding; one must do more than merely claim however fervently to be of such and such a political stripe. The ever-rarer Renaissance man of our day is also devoted to fulfilling reading. Such people avoid specializing in one field of learning to acquire, instead, a somewhat more superficial knowledge of a variety of fields. Being broadly well-read is a (liberal arts) hobby of its own. A retired colleague of the author who has set his sights on reading all the books written by Nobel Prize laureates is an example. Another is provided by book collectors who, I am told by one of them, are most inclined to read what they have acquired.

The liberal arts hobby is set off from other serious pursuits by two of its three basic characteristics: the search for a *broad knowledge* of an area of human life and the search for this knowledge for its own sake. Broad knowledge contrasts with technical knowledge; an admittedly fuzzy distinction based on degree rather than on crisp demarcation. Still, we can say that unlike technical, detailed knowledge, the broad kind is humanizing. Through it we can gain a deep understanding and acceptance of a significant sector of human life (art, food, language, history, etc.) and the needs, values, desires, and sentiments found there. This understanding and acceptance do not necessarily lead, however, to amateur or hobbyist involvement in the sphere of life being studied.

Knowledge sought for its own sake implies that its practical application, if a concern at all, is secondary. Yet liberal arts hobbyists do use the broad knowledge they acquire. These participants do enjoy expressing this knowledge, and the expression may be an important avenue by which they maintain and expand it. Meanwhile, elsewhere in serious leisure knowledge, which is often acquired

through reading, is pivotal in finding fulfilment in the activity. For example, it is generally true that, in the other hobbies and in the amateur and volunteer fields, participants must have certain kinds of knowledge if they are going to produce anything of merit. Thus, many aspiring stand-up comics avail themselves of various workshops, programs of instruction, and individual tutoring sessions to learn better how to perform their art (Stebbins, 1990, Chap. 5); volunteer youth workers attend sets of weekend training sessions to learn how to provide support for youth club members (Hamilton-Smith, 1971); old car collectors engage in utilitarian reading when they study numerous manuals and related material to develop their capacity for touring, showing, and collecting cars and parts of cars (Dannefer, 1980).

Ross (1999) concludes her analysis with five emergent themes bearing on the information search process. One, readers are actively engaged in constructing meaning from their material and applying it to themselves (there is also evidence of this for newspaper readers). Two, the affective dimension is critical to readers' involvement with their material, suggesting that information seeking is sometimes, perhaps often-times, more than rational problem solving. Thus, reading material may be reassuring, frightening, infuriating, and so forth. Three, readers value the trustworthiness of the recommendations received from others and from impersonal but credible sources of advice on reading (e.g., authoritative book reviews and testimonials). Four, Ross found that reading is framed in a social network of friends and relatives who support a reader's interests and whose interests the reader supports in return. Five, experienced readers choose material using a variety of "clues" about what to look for. These include knowledge about genres, authors, cover art, and the reputation of publishers. Their memory of reviews and advice from friends serve as additional clues.

### **Politics as Reading Hobby**

The intellectually oriented followers of politics, although they may be committed to certain political parties or doctrines, nonetheless spend significant amounts of time (and possibly money) informing themselves in this area of life. To be a hobbyist here, one must pursue knowledge and understanding; one must do more than merely claim however fervently to be of such and such a political persuasion. Ross's five emergent themes can guide discussion in this area.

First, political reading hobbyists are actively engaged in constructing meaning from their reading material and applying it to themselves, which they do primarily by routinely perusing newspaper and magazine articles, reading certain books, and watching relevant television programs. The social media and its content

are excluded from this list, in that they mostly constitute an outlet for opinion, attitude, and emotion, not for fact and knowledge. Second, there is an affective dimension to this activity, most certainly the three Ross mentions, namely, reassurance, fright, and anger. Third, readers value the trustworthiness of the recommendations received from others and from impersonal but credible sources of advice on reading. In political reading these credible sources are mainly the *newspapers of record*.

This is because the press is the primary conduit through which people engage with the ideas they need to function as democratic citizens that it must be both protected and scrutinized. Every country presents its own unique aspects and sometimes challenges as far the codes correlated with Journalism codes today. "Truth", "accuracy", and "objectivity" are cornerstones of journalism ethics. Journalists are encouraged to maintain a degree of detachment from the religions, groups, or countries they are associated with, in order to minimize potential biases in their reporting. This separation is intended to mitigate the influence of personal biases on their journalistic writing (Wikipedia, "Newspaper of Record," retrieved 14 January 2024).

For an extensive worldwide list of newspapers of record, see Wikipedia, "Newspaper of Record" (retrieved 14 January 2024).

This article continues stating that:

the second type of "newspaper of record" (also known as a "journal of record," or by the French term *presse de référence*) is not defined by any formal criteria, and

their characteristics can vary. The category typically consists of those newspapers that are considered to meet higher [standards of journalism](#) than most print media, including editorial independence (particularly from the ruling government and from its owners), accountability (mistakes are acknowledged), attention to detail and accuracy, and

comprehensiveness and balance of coverage;<sup>[15]</sup> they are often renowned internationally, and regarded as sources in their country and/or region by other global outlets.<sup>[16][17]</sup>

The scholarly basis of this quotation is set out in footnotes 15-17. The quotation is the best summary I know of.

## **Experiential Knowledge**

The scope of this article excludes discussion of the leisure experience, but rather it intends to clarify for leisure studies a related concept, namely, that of experience as knowledge, or *experiential knowledge*, as Thomasina Borkman referred to it nearly 50 years ago. She defined experiential knowledge as “truth learned from personal experience with a phenomenon rather than truth acquired by discursive reasoning, observation, or reflection on information provided by others” (Borkman, 1976, p. 446). She identified “the two most important elements of experiential knowledge.” One is the type of information on which it is based. That type consists of wisdom and know-how gained from personal participation in a phenomenon instead of isolated, unorganized bits of facts and feelings on which a person has not reflected. This wisdom and know-how tend to be concrete, specific, and commonsensical, since they are based on the individual’s actual experience, which is unique, limited, yet more or less representative of the experience of others participating in the same activity.

The second element is one’s attitude toward that information. In other words, what level of ‘certitude’ does the participant have toward the experiential knowledge that one has acquired. The idea of experiential knowledge “denotes a high degree of conviction that the insights learned from direct participation in a situation are truth, because the individual has faith in the validity and authority of the knowledge obtained by being a part of a phenomenon” (Borkman, 1976, p. 447). She adds that experiential knowledge is different from information provided by others. The second refers to being acquainted with or able to recognize facts, whereas the first has to do with understanding or having a complete mental grasp of the nature and significance of something.

Is experiential knowledge nevertheless fundamentally hypothetical? Maybe. It does lack the conclusiveness that comes with confirmatory research. Still, the old common-sense adage that misery loves company has been shown to be correct, though the data suggest that the company must be suffering from the same kind of distress (Schacter 1959).

## **Conclusions**

The discussion here has been about facts and the ignorance thereof. That ignorance may be unintended, which if political, hobbyist readers can cure themselves of it by studying how political issues are reported and analyzed in the newspapers and magazines of record. As the participant develops in this pastime

and lives in the United States, expect trouble from some of your politically ignorant friends and relatives. As 20<sup>th</sup> century journalist and philosopher, H. L. Mencken observed: "[the men the American people admire most extravagantly are the most daring liars; the men they detest most violently are those who try to tell them the truth.](#)" Note as well that by no means all knowledge has fact as its base. The facts proclaimed in the various myths are not empirically anchored and cannot therefore be verified. The same holds for the multitude of conspiracy theories. Therefore, lacking a factual base these two types must often grapple with factual knowledge when striving in the wider society for acceptance of (i.e. faith in) their fact-free claims.

## Endnotes

[1] See Wikipedia for discussions of misinformation and disinformation.

[2] The designation of liberal arts is used in the sense of the arts branch of university education.

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**Forthcoming:**

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