Against the Grain

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Epistemology — The Allure of the Latest Shiny Thing

T. Scott Plutchak

Library Analytics ...
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U.S. healthcare sector, healthcare libraries in Australia and other countries around the world.

Many people can be very nervous about sharing data with a third party and want confidence in the technology and security surrounding that. And this is a global concern. People want an assurance that they don't have to share their data and that data won't be shared without their permission. But when it is collected and processed legally, it creates opportunities for all parties to gain rich analytics that can support decision making and improve services and ultimately deliver better outcomes.

Conclusion

Making the online user experience as positive as possible is vital and publishers know this. But privacy must not be lost as a result of easy access. Publishers need to be sympathetic to user concerns when it comes to taking and analyzing data. GDPR will help in providing a regulatory framework while allowing more people to recognize the value within data. But **Cambridge Analytica** is just one example of a situation that has highlighted dangers of data exploitation.

We know that librarians and publishers are looking for detailed analytics so they can see who is using online services and where and how much value this can bring to their future strategy. They want to ensure that end users can access as many library resources as possible and target those reports and articles that are doing well, as well as those that aren't.

Central to this digital identity governance — establishing trust between the library and the user — is using tools and technology which set a pseudonymous ID as a default. This identity authenticates the user and allows publishers to know who they are (e.g., where they are coming from without their names associated) and why they are using the resource.

With technological improvements, it is now much easier for users to access analytics and understand them. New features include the ability to open, save and favorite reports meaning they can make more comparisons and collate the data more effectively.

Some users can be very nervous about sharing lots of data with a third party and the security and policy issues surrounding this need to be addressed. They will need assurances that they don't have to share their data and that data won't be shared without their permission. However, one of the key messages is that without it, services will not evolve to be the very best they can be for all users.

Epistemology — The Allure of the Latest Shiny Thing

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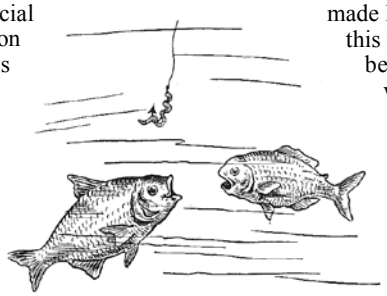
I received a small inheritance from my Mom. It was the remainder of her IRA, split equally among her five kids. I arranged to have my share moved from her broker in Appleton down to mine in Alabama. The day I went to see **Laura** to sign the paperwork was near the peak of the most recent Bitcoin bubble and it just so happened that the amount from my Mom was almost exactly the price of one Bitcoin. I joked with **Laura** that instead of giving the money to her to invest, I was going to go ahead and buy one. Naturally, the next day the value started to drop and a week later the price was down 25%. As I write this, it's gone down another 25% and no one can predict with certainty which way it'll go next. The true believers are hanging tight and the sceptics are enjoying their self-righteousness.

I wasn't ever really interested in putting any of Mom's money into cryptocurrencies, but I was intrigued with how the financial frenzy has turned media attention toward these digital mysteries and their underlying technology, the blockchain. For several weeks after the peak it seemed every day brought a new article or review exploring, or breathlessly predicting, the ways in which blockchain technology was going to transform commerce and education and our very political systems for the better, or was going to blow up in the biggest financial bust since — oh, pick your favorite, from housing to dotcoms to tulips.



About that same time **Steven Johnson** published a long piece about blockchain possibilities in the *NYT Magazine*[1] and as I read it I wondered what **Geoff Bilder** thought. **Bilder** (Director of Strategic Initiatives at **Crossref**) is the most insightful person I know when it comes to the intersection of people and technology. He's done a lot of work on trust and identity, concepts which are central to the blockchain hype. A quick search to see what he was up to lately took me to the **PIDapalooza** 2018 website and I wasn't surprised to see that he was doing a session (with **Martin Fenner** of **DataCite**) titled, "The Bollockschain and other PID hallucinations." I sent him an email.

He replied with a number of useful comments but I think the most important is his observation that technophiles "keep trying to address social issues by attempting to hack around them. They have essentially given up on the messy, slow and tedious stuff of coalition building, politics and good governance."

I'm writing this on April 10th, just as **Zuckerberg** is testifying before **Congress** about what went wrong with Facebook, that the personal information of millions of users was sold to Russian trolls who used it to target political rants at possibly suggestive voters in an attempt to sow discord among the electorate and (possibly) tip the election to **Donald Trump**. The outrage is couched in terms of personal privacy, but that misses the point. Privacy is among the least of my worries. (After all, it was long ago in 1999 when **Scott McNealy**, CEO of **Sun Microsystems**, raised a ruckus by declaring, "You have zero privacy anyway. Get over it.")

Much of the opprobrium being tossed at **Zuck** blames him for not adequately protecting Facebook's users' privacy because his business model, the algorithms that have made him one of the richest people in the world, is based on hoovering up as much detailed information about peoples' behaviors and tastes and inclinations and desires as possible. This argument sees the mistakes Facebook has made as driven by his business interests. But I think he's an idealist. His idealism made him rich, but he didn't get into this with that as the main goal. He believes he's creating a better world. He'll do it by connecting people, setting up social sharing systems beyond anything previously imaginable. One cost of this better world is the loss of privacy, but he was fine with that. He didn't focus on protecting privacy because he didn't believe it mattered that much — certainly not as much as we stood to gain.

Now he's confronted with a backlash. There's the Facebook "Ugly" memo, in which VP **Bosworth** appears to say that the collateral damage of somebody being killed by bullies or in a terrorist attack is an acceptable cost. "The ugly truth is that we believe in connecting people so deeply that anything that allows us to connect more people more often is 'de facto' good."[2] Give **Bosworth** and **Zuckerberg** the benefit of the doubt that they didn't believe that statement when it was written, that **Bosworth** was deliberately being provocative to get people inside the company to think about what the acceptable cost should be. It still vibrates with their passionate belief in the underlying goodness of connecting people. They don't see that this degree of radical connectivity has unavoidable social costs. So they think that they only need to figure out how to tweak things around the edges to "protect privacy" and all will be well.

They're certainly not alone in their technophiliac idealism. The expansion of the World Wide Web itself was fueled by the belief that it would usher in a new age of citizen democracy. Remember "the wisdom of the crowd?" We don't hear so much about it anymore now that we're busy trying to keep our heads down among the rock-throwing mobs. Trolldom has rather tarnished our belief in the perfectibility of self-government by giving

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everyone the tools to say whatever they want to everyone in the world.

But the belief that if we can just get the technology right — or get the right technology — it'll finally empower our best natures and defeat our worst impulses continues to pump through the veins of the technophiles. Now we have the blockchain. And the breathless promises that it will fix the ills of the world including everything that's deficient with scholarly communication and education.

The most entertaining hype I've come across is from the **Tapscott** machine, purveyors of excitable business books since the late 80s. The latest, *The Blockchain Revolution: How the Technology Behind Bitcoin is Changing Money, Business, and the World*, imagines the technology ridding society of inequality and unfairness and empowering people in all economic strata.[3] For a taste, check out the article in *Educause Review*, "The Blockchain Revolution and Higher Education."[4] The rhetoric whipsaws between claims that the revolution is inevitable because the technology is so powerful, and warnings that we might miss out on the benefits if we don't get properly organized. All that's required is for everybody to get on board. Consultants are standing by to assist you.

To be fair, not all of the interest in blockchain is breathless hype. **Digital Science** recently announced a project to explore using blockchain to support peer review.[5] **ORCID** is participating, as is **Nature Springer**. They're working with **Katalysis**, an Amsterdam startup that is exploring blockchain technologies "to democratize the value of online content." (Well, okay, they're a little breathless.) It makes sense for **ORCID** to explore this, since identity and trust are at the core of their mission. The rhetoric in the **Digital Science** *Blockchain for Research* report teeters on the edge of hype, but it is clear about the problems potentially being addressed by the technology as well as the challenges inherent in getting widespread adoption.[6]

Very far from breathless is the long, dense and sober report from the **European Commission**, *Blockchain in Education*.[7] It cautiously concludes that, "blockchain could probably disrupt the market in student information systems and loosen the control current players have over this market." Not surprisingly, given the source, after enumerating the key areas where blockchain implementations have the potential for improving certain aspects of higher education, the authors warn, "For all this to come to be, regulation and standardisation will determine the extent and speed of progress either forward or backward." The libertarian enthusiasts who believe the blockchain will finally free us from the tyranny of centralization and governments will not be pleased. Nonetheless, the report does an excellent job of outlining the real potential for blockchain technologies in education, particularly in regard to certification and the management of intellectual property, while avoiding the hype and being realistic about the governance challenges.

Most of the enthusiastic writing about blockchain, even when it tries to rein in the hype, ignores the technical limitations — it's slow and uses obscene amounts of energy. (For a well-written and sarcastically sharp antidote to the **Tapscotts**, check out **David Gerard's** *Attack of the 50 Foot Blockchain*[8]). Read deeply into the articles and books imagining large scale transformations of social systems and it becomes clear that the core to solving the problems involves bringing people together to come to agreement on goals and desired outcomes, winners and losers, control and economics. Where the hard work of achieving consensus on difficult social problems has been done — and that certainly includes many of the issues we face in education and scholarly communication — blockchain technologies may provide helpful infrastructure (or might turn out to be superfluous). But the technology doesn't create agreement and goodwill.

It's been a little sad this week watching **Zuckerberg's** idealism being chipped at. He still believes that connecting the world is a good thing and that we'll all be better off in the long run. But it turns out that connecting us hasn't made us better people.

The blockchain hype cycle is like that. There are undoubtedly areas where the technology will help people implement solutions to particular problems. But the debates that have roiled scholarly communication for the last several decades are about goals and objectives and competing interests and visions and who gets to control what. Inserting blockchains isn't going to make it any easier for us to sort all of that out.

Endnotes

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Considering Games and Gamification in Libraries & Associated Entities — How the Longing for Tabletops has Revitalized Games

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About five years ago I was introducing a board game to students in a live classroom. (One of my colleagues characterizes this as a "butts in seats" class as opposed to an asynchronous online class). As I was explaining the rules to the class of 27 students, I noticed a sea of increasingly confused faces. "Sorry, **Mr. Seay**," one of the students piped up, "but I have never played a board game before." Astonished at this obvious outlier, I asked if anyone else shared his predicament. I was stunned. None of them had ever played a board game. It had finally happened. I was the "old school" guy with an 8 track tape in a room full of digital downloaders. I was officially old. It was only after I got over my shock of just being old that I was able to lament the end of the analog game era. Now, fortunately I think I was a bit premature. I am still old. But analog is back.

Today around the world in pubs and public libraries (because, what is the difference really?) people are gathered in groups of actual people around actual tables to play board and card games. In fact the board game cafe[1] — where for a $5 cover charge a group of friends gets a table and chooses from a myriad of

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