A Path from Data to Wisdom?

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In chapter 4 of the textbook, I*nformation Systems for Business and Beyond*, the authors present a graphic showing upward arrows connecting boxes starting with Data at the bottom, through Information, Knowledge, and finally Wisdom at the top. The accompanying text describes data as "raw facts", information as "processed data that possess context, relevance, and purpose", knowledge as the beliefs or perceptions about relationships among relevant facts or concepts, and wisdom as the combination of knowledge and experience producing a deeper understanding (Bourgeois, D, Martati, J. Wang, S. & Smith J., 2019). Throughout the first several weeks of our Management and Information Technology course, we have been told that we are in the *information age*, which Wikipedia defines as a historical period beginning in the mid-20th century characterized by a rapid shift from traditional industries to an economy centered on information technology (Wikipedia contributors, 2023, January 29). One of the memes of this period is that "data is the new oil", which emphasizes the need to process data, just like oil, before it can be turned into something that is valuable (Kenway Consulting, 2022). As a 62 year old high school computer science teacher who has watched developments in the information age for more than forty years, I am struck by the profound lack of vision we have as a society as to where we are aiming in this "information age", and I am wondering if it is possible for us to find a path from data to wisdom.

In an interview by the Harvard Business Review, Harvard Business School professor Clay Christensen, asked to define *disruptive innovation*, states that it has a very

specific meaning, not as an innovation that changes the way things are done, but rather as an innovation that so reduces the cost of doing something that it greatly expands the number of people who have access to the use of it (2012, 0:0:28). The example used to illustrate this concept is the electronic digital computer, which developed from something that cost millions of dollars to buy and took years to be trained to use, making it available to only the largest corporations and universities (2012, 0:1:09), through "a sequence of innovations from the mainframe to a mini to a desktop to a laptop and now to a smartphone that is democratized technology to the point that everybody has access to it around the world" (2022, 0:1:24). In much of the rest of the interview, Prof. Christensen discusses the role of disruptive innovations on businesses, describing how they force an established company to look for ways of marketing to a new customer base, the lower end of the market, and how for that reason this challenge tends to be solved by new instead of established companies (2012). All of this is very relevant to our course, but what captivated me was near the end of the interview where he describes the importance not of learning what to think, but rather how to think (2012, 0:6:27). Paraphrasing his conversational speech a bit, he says that "the insight is that ... data is only available about the past and when we teach people that they should be data-driven and fact-based and analytical as they look into the future ... we condemn them to take action after the game is over" (2012, 0:6:43). "[T]he only way you can look into the future where there's no data", he says, "is to have a good theory", since "every time we take action it's predicated on a theory" (2012, 0:7:04).

It is indeed the future about which I am most concerned, and what motivated me to enroll in our MBA program here at University of the People. I am hoping that humanity will be able to develop new theories that can help guide us out of the deep structural problems we face, including ever growing wealth and income inequality and global climate change. Computing power is indeed now available to most people throughout the world, and we are swimming (perhaps drowning?) in data. Yet inequality continues to grow and the planet continues to warm, both at an alarming rate. What good is all this computational power if it can not be effectively applied toward solving our most fundamental problems?

Professor Christensen, despite his brilliance, is still trapped in the fishbowl (Seager, T. P., 2018) at the Harvard Business School, incapable of imagining any way that innovation could be guided by anything other than profits and losses. I am convinced that theories not rooted in what is truly important to human beings, that fail to put people and the planet before profits in the most fundamental way that they operate, will fail to deliver us from the challenges we face in the 21st century, since they will not be capable of leading us from data to wisdom.

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