Do Those with Wisdom Truly Hold Power?

Knowledge is the foundation of our society. It is something that those without it seek to achieve, and those with it seek to spread. Knowledge is, in many cases, what drives human behavior—hence the philosopher Plato’s famous saying, “Human behavior flows from three main sources: desire, emotion, and knowledge.” Knowledge is especially valuable during times of anguish, similar to this catastrophic pandemic going on in the world presently. Scientists and doctors are currently working their tails off in the pursuit of knowledge regarding the virus called COVID-19. As many know, it is impossible to go one day without hearing anything about the ominous virus. How do we know if the information presented to us is indeed true? With all of the chaos going on, the media is spewing updates left and right with no specific origin or credibility. Society must now, in the words of George Bernard Shaw, “Beware of false knowledge; it is more dangerous than ignorance.”

There are infinite examples of individuals seeking and spreading knowledge in literature. Let us begin with Hippocratic Writings, a medical work that serves as the foundation still of modern medicine today. In this, Hippocrates outlines the history, philosophy and practice of medicine. In the “Introduction” section, he states “Yet is was in the late sixth or early fifth century that the first sustained critical investigations into the causes and treatment of diseases began and that we find the first attempts to define and defend the status of medicine as a rational discipline or technē” (Hippocrates 13). Here we see that the vast conquest for knowledge dates back to centuries ago, and that humanity has always been looking for new information to impart on others. He then goes on to say that “…science is the father of knowledge but opinion breeds ignorance” (69). This illustrates that fiction should not be mistaken for fact. Hippocrates implies that knowledge is purely factual and those who fake and lack knowledge are ignorant. We can relate this back to the COVID conundrum in which much of the “knowledge” being spread around is not grounded in science and untrue, making the people who are obliviously spreading these falsities ignorant.

Hippocrates’ innate desire to acquire knowledge is also presented in George Eliot’s fictional work Middlemarch. In this work, the main characters, Dorothea and Lydgate are active pursuers of knowledge. Lydgate travels abroad to further his studies in medicine so he can one day acquire enough knowledge to be a doctor, and Dorothea hopes to acquire knowledge via a potential spouse. At one instance, she says “‘I should wish to have a husband who was above me in judgement and in all knowledge’” (Eliot 38). This literary example once again demonstrates the prominence of knowledge in human society.

For a final (but never the last) example of the importance of knowledge in the ongoing world, we can analyze Deborah Lacks in Rebecca Skloot’s narrative The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks. She mentions that people tell her “‘Oh, y’all could be rich! Y’all gotta sue John Hopkin…’ But I don’t want that” (Skloot 256). On the next page, she says “But first I want to go see my mother cells, so I know what everybody’s talkin about at the conference” (257). Deborah makes it clear that she did not care about the money, she simply wanted to be informed and kept in the loop regarding the use of her mother’s cells. This shows the importance of knowledge to her and the rest of Henrietta’s family. There are numerous other literary examples showing the value of knowledge, such as in The Two Kinds of Decay by Sarah Manguso, where Manguso herself describes her life living with a mysterious disease with little known about it (which sounds vaguely familiar). The concept of knowledge is also presented The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating by Elizabeth Tova Bailey, where Bailey is bed ridden, but entertains herself by furthering her knowledge about snails and sharing it with readers. Knowledge is of great value to
The notion of gaining knowledge to gain power is also widely perpetuated in the real world. Our first example is actually quite a comical one. During this time, political figures have been spewing information about the pandemic as well. In some cases, this information is falsely presented to the general public. Now, these discrepancies are fair mistakes to make for anyone who is not knowledgeable regarding COVID-19, but many individuals are feeding this inaccurate information to the public. Because being knowledgeable in a subject can often give one authority and power, political figures often speak (falsely) about the present situation in attempt to deliver knowledge to raise themselves higher up on the pedestal.

In addition to this, I have seen unbacked rumors circulating around Instagram claiming that drinking potent alcohol can boost one’s immune system and kill COVID-19. The course of this rumor is unknown, but it has had a tremendous effect on some populations. An article from The National Post reports that citizens in Iran have been binge drinking alcohol to keep the virus at bay. It states that “At least 27 people in Iran’s southwestern Khuzestan and Alborz provinces died overnight from alcohol poisoning, the Fars News Agency reported Monday, as some turned to ingesting industrial-grade ethanol and methanol in a misguided effort to stave off the coronavirus tearing through the country” (National Post). This occurred unfortunately because somebody wanted to appear smart and authoritative. Unluckily, this falsity spread rapidly through the media and got loads of attention simply because it was a new idea.

All of this spread of misinformation begs the ultimate question: why would anyone perpetuate information that is not directly known to be true? Guy Berger, Director for Policies and Strategies for Communication and Information at UNESCO, states that “The motives for spreading disinformation are many, and include political aims, self-promotion, and attracting attention as part of a business model” (UN News). As reflected in literary works, the gain and spread of knowledge is instinctual, but unfortunately not all knowledge that is spread is true. During today’s pandemic crisis, individuals frantically speak out on the virus without thinking of the facts or ethos. Society is reaching so far for a solution that much of the information being presented is simply the result of an incredible source craving attention. Accurate knowledge is extremely valuable during this time, so do not be deceived by someone who acts as an authority.
Works Cited


