Information aspects of cultural and political divisions: CS/IS iSchools and Bishop's Big Sort

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Abstract
Increasing concern focuses on how Americans self-sort—choosing to live, socialize, worship, and more with like-minded people. The ways in which people interact with information, among other dynamics, may perpetuate this self-sorting. Although much discussion describes the damaging nature of the sorting, minimal ideas for reversing it have emerged. An international ambassador concerned with the trend recently became aware of information schools with computer science programs and challenged affiliates with programs thusly combined to find ways to reverse the trend. In this provocative Session of Interaction and Engagement, scholars from CS/IS iSchools will lead participants in meeting that challenge. After viewing the challenge, attendees will use an audience participation system to react to initial ideas presented by the authors. A final large group discussion will focus on how CS/IS and all iSchools can contribute to ongoing dialog about complex social tendencies, like self-sorting.

Keywords: information science--forecasts and trends; information interaction; community informatics; applied philosophy of information

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1 Description

1.1 Purpose and Intended Audience

There’s been increased attention on a national trend involving cultural and political division (Bishop, 2008; see also Putnam, 2000). This division, which includes how people select information and news sources that reinforce their beliefs, results in segregated groups of Americans that seldom interact with people who are not like themselves. Although much discussion describes the damaging nature of this polarization or self-sorting trend, minimal ideas for reversing the trend have emerged. From what James (Joe) Torsella—U.S. Ambassador (Ret.) to the United Nations and founding Executive Director of the National Constitution Center—learned about Drexel University during his recent appointment as a distinguished visiting Fellow there, he suspected that Drexel’s then-new computer science/information science iSchool could determine how to reverse the trend. He challenged those affiliated with the College to do so (Torsella, 2015). This Session for Interaction and Engagement (SIE) extends Torsella’s challenge to all iSchools.

During this SIE, representatives from each CS/IS iSchool will share initial ideas for meeting Torsella’s challenge. All participants will discuss and vote on the ideas presented. These activities will serve as a springboard for considering how to apply our collective knowledge and scholarship to broader issues about how the nature of information access and use can influence and perpetuate a national identity. Topics the authors and subsequent discussion will address are reflected in questions like:

- Do any information practices inform the ways in which citizens sort themselves into homogenous groups such that they only need to interact with, live near, vote like, worship with, etc. people who are just like them?
- If so, what policies, practices, or processes may information science educators and researchers introduce to begin to reverse what has been identified as a self-sorting trend or to enable our students and alum to do so?
- Is the challenge that Torsella posed to CS/IS iSchools more for all iSchools or for all of higher education in general?
References
