

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?

- Can iSchools adopt pedagogical practices, conduct research, or inspire the creation of products that acknowledge, increase, or model awareness of the other, or those not like ourselves?
- Can our collective influence on future computing and information professionals make any difference in the Bishop-identified trend?

This SIE will be provocative, timely, and unique given its proximity to the National Constitution Center, its timing leading up to the 2016 Presidential election, and, its role in providing entrée into a dialog apropos the “Partnership with Society” 2016 iConference theme. The authors’ comments along with small and large group interactions will seed discussion and later inform a final report about the influence of iSchools.

Additionally, the SIE provides an opportunity to consider the role of the iSchool movement and its influence on the larger society. Such a consideration is consistent with how studies in the sociology of the professions suggest that those within a discipline must endeavor to ensure that the discipline can have an appropriate and meaningful societal influence (Abbott, 1988).

1.2 Proposed activities

Prior to the conference, social media messages will encourage attendance. The SIE will be organized in three parts. A brief opening—Part I (15 minutes)—will orient all to the event format, the authors and the video recording of Torsella’s challenge. In Part II, participants will react to the authors’ comments as follows (80 minutes):

1. an author will present 1-3 ideas in response to Torsella’s challenge;
2. in dyads, participants will share brief, initial reactions to those ideas; and then,
3. all participants will subsequently vote on each idea presented using a smart-phone based, audience participation system.

Part III (25 minutes) moves beyond the reflection in Part II and provides an opportunity for collective analysis and synthesize of ideas discussed. **Specifically, a facilitator will guide attendees in comparing, contrasting, and prioritizing the ideas identified and in exploring additional ideas to which open dialog can lead.**

After the SIE, the Event Organizer in collaboration with the Key Participants will prepare an executive summary, describing this SIE and its outcomes, for inclusion in the conference proceedings.

1.3 Relevance to the Conference/Significance to the Field

This SIE occurs at the intersection of two moments in history. First, the growing success of the iSchool movement is evident in the realized vision of it spreading around the world. For example, even though this panel has a national focus, two international iSchool affiliates—Makerere University (Uganda) and the University of Strathclyde (United Kingdom)—also combine CS and IS. And, an internationally recognized political scientist, Torsella, recognized and is calling on its influence. Additionally, iSchools increasingly secure larger percentages of institutional research funds and, on some campuses, iSchools have the type of influence traditionally held by law or medical schools. Second, our national value of embracing difference is being tested. Torsella (2015) describes how: American’s mobility combines with an abundance of technology and choice to result in citizens segregating themselves into “communities of like-mindedness” in how citizens’ news updating habits, recreation, socialization, etc. involve others who think as they do. Does relatively easy access to information somehow detract from our founding fathers attempt at national cohesion represented in the phrase “We the People?” By exploring issues at the intersection of these two areas of development, this SIE will attract a broad range of scholars who will actively consider how to advance the information field in ways that account for social trends that influence and are influenced by our national trajectory.

1.4 Event length

In order to accommodate a brief multimedia presentation and ensure time for quality participant interaction, the length of this session will be two hours.

2 References

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