TOK Exhibition
May 2022
Knowledge and the Knower

How might the context in which knowledge is presented influence whether it is accepted or rejected?

To explore this prompt, I will investigate knowledge and the knower, specifically the context of knowledge relative to that of the knower, and what effect, if any, this has on the knowledge's acceptance. Knowledge is often contrived to appeal to our circumstances, to influence our thinking. Helping us question and identify such situations gives discussion of this prompt significance.

Object 1: Multiplication Table in Chinese

This is a Chinese multiplication table, which I used to learn by heart in primary school. It is presented like a rhyme, to allow for easy reciting and memorisation of products of 1 to 9.

Although presented in a different language and manner, the mathematical knowledge of multiplication conveyed is no different than that presented elsewhere. 2 times 3 is 6 no matter where you are in the world and how you express it. This is interesting to the exhibition since no matter where and in what context this knowledge is presented, these mathematical truths still hold true. Evidence for these facts are rooted strongly in the bases of natural numbers, and the sheer amount of knowledge based upon these simple facts, not just in mathematics but also in science, make denial impractical and acceptance necessary.

However, some critics might attempt to apply this knowledge to objects that seem to misbehave under mathematics: if I have 2 groups of 3 clouds and merge them together, I end up with 1 cloud, rather than 6. They may argue that multiplication is incorrect within this context, and reject it with respect to similarly ill-behaved objects. Opponents of the critics may refute by saying mathematics is only valid for certain defined applications, and thus not applicable to this situation. Either way, the context, the situation to which it is presented affects whether the knowledge can be held true.

Additionally, the context of who the knowledge is presented to affects the acceptance as well. This table is presented to primary school children, who have not yet had the time to fully develop their critical thinking skills. With less knowledge on the subject, children are more accepting of knowledge presented to them, while adults, with knowledge on multiplication, would reject it if they found any incorrect maths.

Object 2: Smart Street Lamps in Hong Kong

This photo shows vandalism of a smart streetlamp erected by the government in Hong Kong, designed to sense weather and traffic situations, and provide better internet coverage. In this late 2019 photo, protesters topple it due to privacy concerns stemming from their knowledge about its potential role in empowering the central Chinese government to monitor its subjects.

In Hong Kong, many people are weary of government and mainland Chinese surveillance, in fear of being targeted for what they say or do. Some fear a trajectory of increasing surveillance may eventually lead to infringements on freedom of speech, with conversations recorded and actions monitored, scrutinised for blacklisted behaviour. Knowledge of the streetlamp's potential surveillance usage agreed with this context of fear of surveillance enough that it was accepted and acted upon, resulting in the civilian demolition of the streetlamp.

However, similar technologies can be found in the mainland Chinese city of Hangzhou, without the community removing it. City Brain is a system which tracks the traffic within the city, controlling traffic lights based on the data received.

This comparison contributes to the exhibition, since knowledge about potential surveillance roles must have been presented in both contexts, yet it is accepted in only one while brushed off in the other. This is perhaps due to the different levels of trust in their respective local authorities, or maybe the means to reject the technology is available to one but not the other. Either way, it is the community, the context in which these concerns are presented, which decides whether to accept these concerns and act on them, or reject them and leave the technology be, judging the knowledge by the community's inherent biases and situation, all part of the community's context.

Object 3: *Spitting Image* Song "Helping Us All"

This is a snippet from "Helping Us All", a song aired on British satire show Spitting Image in late 2020, mocking British Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak's spending in response to the pandemic. Snapshotted here is a puppet of Sunak gifting "something expensive that will last for years" (tax bill for the spending) to a child. Although implicitly criticising various political figures for their policies, it is presented as satire and in a humorous context, mainly, as a TV show, aiming to entertain its audience.

It is interesting to this exhibition since it raises the issue of whether knowledge claims made in this context and medium are valid, respected and accepted. Although their mockery is based in some truth, creators have incentive to dramatize since entertaining is the main goal, as seen with British Home Secretary Priti Patel's appearance as a ritual-performing vampire. Would valid arguments presented alongside such absurdities be taken seriously? The same criticisms of Sunak's spending, for example, might be presented in the different context of an article published by a venerated newspaper or journal, but because of the medium, be more respected, admissible in formal debates, and more widely accepted as knowledge.

However, consider the effects of the show on laymen: they might not have any preconceptions, having not read formal articles for finding them too cumbersome. After being loosened up by the comedic nature of the show, they may be more inclined to accept the ideas presented. This comparison suggests that the format of knowledge appeals to different people differently, with compatibility between the knowledge's presentation and the knower's context being crucial to whether the knowledge is accepted or rejected.

Image References

1. *Modern Educational Research Society.* https://www.mers.hk/resource/bulletin/content/archieve/index.php?version=103&url=/bulletin04.htm
2. *People's Daily Online.* http://en.people.cn/n3/2019/0826/c90000-9609007.html
3. *YouTube.* https://youtu.be/ndSj1bbjPTo?t=1201