

Invited Talk

Information in the Information Society

Professor Joseph Weizenbaum
Emeritus, Massachusetts Institute of Technology
DrSeppel@aol.com

The title of this talk is deliberately misleading: I really want to talk about misinformation.. Most citizens in what we laughingly call an “information society” derive most of what they know about their world from the mass media, for example from television, newspapers, more recently and increasingly from the World Wide Web and other such sources. But while it is true that the content of the mass media as a whole is from 90 to 95% trash, it is a mistake to blame the media establishment alone for the peoples’ miserable state of world knowledge.

Where, after all, is information created, where does it come from? The media delivers not “news”, not “information”, it delivers *messages* (signals) that, in order to produce information, must first be converted by the work of *interpretation*. That labor can be done only by (in the present context) the human mind.

Information = interpretation (signals)

Information theory teaches that messages have no information content, their interpretation does. And, what is most important, an interpretation of a message is a function of the state (or, in other words, the expectations) of the receiver! It follows that understanding a message, say the “news” delivered on television, involves the existing state of knowledge of the viewer, hence his or her education, socialization, indeed, in principle his whole life history.

For us as educators, also as computer scientists, this implies that we must be attentive to the “state of the receiver”. We must be attentive to the forces that influence the ability of our students to make sense of the signals they receive from us, from the media and from the rest of their world. We must teach them to think critically, and this foremost by means of our own example.