

Book and Media Recommendations: Enlightenment (Lather, Rinse, Repeat)

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ABSTRACT: Under the surface of new narratives, we tell and retell the same stories and relearn the same lessons. From the reasons we teach in the first place, to recalling that progress is not always made linearly, openly, or transparently, and on through to the daily decisions we face as educators, we are in the business of providing enlightenment to the next group that comes through the door, over and over again. This selection of book and media recommendations visits (and revisits) the theme of how we need to learn (and relearn) the important lessons we wish to convey.

KEYWORDS: General Public, Public Understanding/Outreach, Interdisciplinary/Multidisciplinary, Textbooks/Reference Books, Ethics

There are no new stories, only retellings of old stories in new skins. In this selection of book and media recommendations, I am struck by a nearly unbearable sameness in the intended lessons: how it is that we never quite seem to learn them and how necessary it is to rediscover what we already know. Our collective capacity to forget seems purposeful: if you could not forget or get past a pique of terror, sadness, or depression, then you would be forever locked into that moment. Amnesia is purposeful, but it also means that joy is as fleeting as agony, as is revelation and enlightenment. And so we visit and revisit ideas. Perhaps it is an important insight that we move forward in nudges and reminders (intentionally plural), incrementally rather than by leaps, which makes this annual collection of recommendations all the more important—a chance for the reminders we need to overcome and, at least for a moment, the amnesia.

■ CORE VALUES

*Mindware: Tools for Smart Thinking*¹ by Professor Richard Nisbett contains accessible descriptions of reasoning strategies that, when employed well, can lead to good decision-making. These strategies are quite familiar to researchers, but many of the cautions are easily forgotten, so *Mindware* can help with that amnesia. Strategies such as multivariate analysis, the law of large numbers, regression, correlation, and cost-benefit analysis, Nisbett argues, can be brought to bear on life's daily dilemmas if only you know their ins and outs. Taking each technique in turn, he dissects the origins of the method, explores the limitations, applies it to real-world cases and, in what I like most, he includes the recurring interpretive errors. Although meant for the lay public, this book, and particularly the parts on errors, should be on the minds of researchers who are cautious not to misinterpret or overinterpret their statistical and analytical findings.

Humans, Nisbett reminds us, right down to the unconscious parts of our neurology, are finders of patterns and attributors of cause. These two things can be an awesome combination when sorting out the phenomena of the world, but they can also create the link between global warming and pirates. I do not think one can ever have enough warnings about the tendency

for physical scientists to overinterpret correlative social science information when the results from studying even highly controlled physical phenomena can be so tentative at best. We are pattern-finders, and our neurology is compelled by big data analytics. Yet, in education, we do not appreciate the concept of side effects: we readily ascribe the results from a statistical average to the behavior of an individual without considering, as we do in medicine, that the intervention necessarily had a negative effect on a fraction of the population. It is also true, you see, that 60% of the people who viewed that last purchase you made did not select or recommend the related item. These are lessons that need to be learned and then relearned.

■ PIOUS SUBTERFUGE

If *Church of Spies: The Pope's Secret War against Hitler*² was not a true story, it would still be a page-turner. The fact that author Mark Riebling had access to previously unknown research materials from the Vatican makes this new view of the reign of Pope Pius XII worthy of reflection. For 75 years, Pius XII has been generally criticized for his public silence on the Nazi atrocities; these are the stories we grew up with.

This book (Figure 1) rewrites the story in compelling terms. Hitler was outright in targeting the Catholic Church as his enemy, and it was noticed. Pius XII, who had served for the church in Berlin for over 10 years, was well-connected, particularly through a Munich lawyer known (I kid you not) as "Joey Ox". Riebling builds a convincing and well-documented case for Pius XII, shielded by plausible deniability and the appearance of indifference, giving his blessing for assassination attempts on Hitler and taking a much more strategic and active role than history has ever given him credit for. And, according to Riebling, Hitler was only barely dissuaded by his inner circle from his desire to kidnap the Pope. This is spy versus spy at its best and then made that much better for the chance to relearn a little history.

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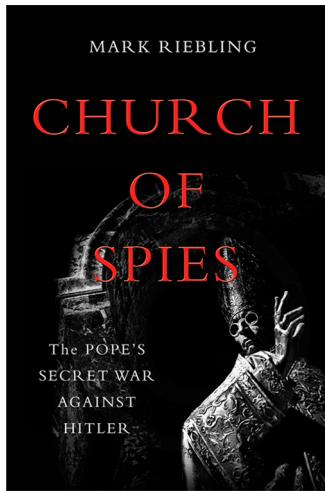


Figure 1. *Church of Spies: The Pope's Secret War against Hitler*² cover image provided by Basic Books and reproduced with permission.

■ RE-GENESIS

Information overload is disrupting the University at its core, and everything needs to be reinvented.

Yeah, well. Been there, done that. Chad Wellmon's book, *Organizing Enlightenment: Information Overload and the Invention of the Modern Research University*,³ is the one I have been waiting for because it so cogently points to the error we have made and remade for a couple of hundred years (Figure 2). A university is not only about dispensing information and

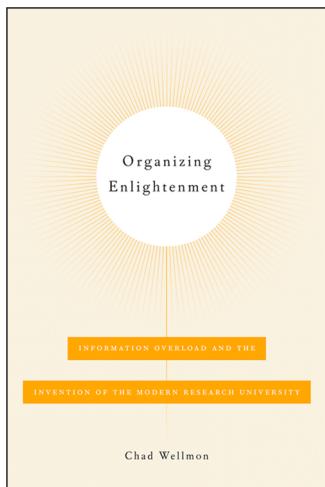


Figure 2. *Organizing Enlightenment: Information Overload and the Invention of the Modern Research University*³ cover image provided by Johns Hopkins University Press and reproduced with permission.

delivering knowledge, a mistake that allows people to get quite exercised about how disruptive the latest delivery system will be.

Wellmon lays it out plainly. Sure enough, the printing press (a disruptive technology) resulted in a flood of widely accessible information (books), and by the 1700s, there was plenty of handwringing and teeth-gnashing about how to deal with so much accessible information. As case studies, books, and the later emergence of the mail service, radio, television, etc., have all proved a few things. First, information distribution and delivery has never been the primary goal of an education.

Second, the need for cultivating and sustaining knowledge—which is an activity, not an index—and how to get this *Wissenschaft* from one generation to the next, is a robust one and relies on some bedrock structures. And third, with optimism, that this most recent go-round with information technology will have as little success in killing education as the prior ones.

The t-shirt worthy bottom line in *Organizing Enlightenment*: increasing amounts of information, and unfiltered access to it, make the core mission and job of universities even more indispensable, not less.

■ ONE KIND OF CHARACTER

As tempting as it is to read the compelling *Mr. Robot*⁴ as a post-Snowden, anarcho-cyber-info-terror drama (which it is), I am recommending the first season of this show because of a strong combination of the writing of, directing of, and particularly actor Rami Malek's skilled portrayal of Elliot, the main and nontypical character.

Elliot is an unapologetic, drug-addled, antisocial misanthrope; he talks directly to us, and we share the delusions of his untrustworthy perceptions as we view the world through his eyes (oh, those eyes!), peering out from the shadow of his drawn hoodie. And we are squarely on his side because, I think, we fear that his paranoia is fully justified every time the results from a random Internet search end up being the advertisement on the next website we visit ("people who bought this..."). In Elliot, we see ourselves in someone who might otherwise be described as a despicable character.

■ ANOTHER KIND OF CHARACTER

I am a sucker for teacher movies, and in this crowd, the 2014 release titled *Whiplash*⁵ is extra special. The entire film is a case study worthy of inclusion in any teacher-training (or coaching) program. The moral dilemma pivots on a single question that creeps up on you after you have likely made your decision about what this story is about, which is a masterful ploy because it causes you to revisit your prior experience with the film about three-quarters of the way through.

I am not going to tell you the question, and I am going to urge you away from most of the written reviews because they tell too much in their rush to erudition; instead, let me take you by the shoulders and simply point you to the show, albeit with an obligatory warning about depictions of teaching that include abusive physical behaviors, the prevalent use of coarse language and homophobic slurs, and the terrible possibility that the provocative actions of an antagonist might well be justified. Damn. Did it again: we see ourselves in someone who might otherwise be described as a despicable character.

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Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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