

OK, have you heard the really old worn-out story about your elders walking to school uphill in a foot of snow—with the obvious point being about how hard the earlier generation had it compared to you? Of course, you've heard that, or something like it! And nowadays that actually rings pretty true, as we can simply roll out of bed and walk a few feet to a connected laptop and zoom all day for classes or meetings. Yes, times have changed. But then again, times have always changed—it's just faster now!

We're here today to look at another dimension of our series on Research-Wisdom-Action, you know, how we can forge proven paths to consistently strong decisions! So, today, we're going to consider another core building to great research—and that's *access* to valuable materials for that great research. The truth is, for the people in a freedom-based, economically-developed country, there's *nothing* that has changed more over the last fifty years than *access*. That's why I gave you that little word-picture about walking to school in lots and lots of snow—which I actually did a number of times as a kid. Ha!

So what better way to start this episode than to give you a glimpse into my access to research 50 years ago when growing up in a small town on the high plains of Eastern Colorado—a virtually treeless, flat landscape where farmers wrestle water out of the ground to irrigate several crops not naturally suitable to be grown there at all. In that time and place, residents had little access to great research.

My most influential window into a wider world as a kid was Walter. Every weekday afternoon, I would try to catch Walter on TV for his half-hour report. Walter Cronkite was the very famous news anchor for CBS, the network of TV stations nationwide that brought news from around the world. Walter was the only game in my town, because there were no other TV networks like NBC or ABC reaching into my corner of the world! Forget Netflix, forget Disney+, forget literally anything besides CBS! Boy, did I eat up those CBS broadcasts with reports from Cairo, London, or Saigon. And radio? Well, that was all about scratchy music on low-grade audio receivers. And remember, no cable TV. No internet. So Walter ruled as to what the news even was and the filter he put on it. As Walter intoned in his closing phrase every evening, "That's the way it is." Of course, that so-called "news" was very abbreviated and highly biased, even though, in those times, all journalists doggedly self-proclaimed their "objectivity."

Then, there was Fanny. Yes, Fanny—a truly dear, classy lady—was the head librarian for a couple of decades for the town's public library where several thousand volumes were housed. I perused all those books, read much, and pretty much settled on two authoritative sources of information: the Hardy Boys mystery series for boys...of course, I read each book multiple times...and *Encyclopedia Britannica*, that huge multivolume set that condensed massively complex subjects down to a few brief paragraphs.

Yes, other sources were in my world—routine textbooks were assigned by schoolteachers, and the chance afforded by my generous mother to buy a couple of paperback books each month from the school flyer sent home with me. Enter a few modern classics, like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which she wisely made me wait to read until I was older. But the Bible was not in the mix at the time—our family occasionally attended the spiritually-dead mainline church where I never once heard the gospel. So, in middle school, I challenged why church attendance meant anything! No good answer was offered...and that was that.

And so, that was the limited information access in my world. The extraordinary, unparalleled Bible itself was considered irrelevant except for those select families attending a couple of strong churches. That left me with Walter, Fanny, and a few weak books assigned by teachers largely unwilling or unable to bring ideas alive. But wait a minute—there *was* the "Bookmobile." Somewhere along the way, some enterprising town citizens went together with other towns in eastern Colorado and equipped a van with books that would travel from town to town, expanding our access beyond the four walls of the town library. For a kid like me, the arrival of the Bookmobile in my small town was like Christmas in July!

Interestingly, I still use a kind of Bookmobile today. It's called Amazon! Jeff Bezos and his company has now moved me from accessing maybe thousands of volumes once in a while—like when the Bookmobile

hit town—to literally millions of books instantly. Plus Amazon’s book reviews. Plus links and search capabilities. And access from anywhere using a connected mobile appliance: want to order a book from the bleachers at a baseball game? Sure, go ahead. Millions of titles. Ready for you, anytime, anywhere.

So, you want even more access to more information than the Amazon Bookmobile? Well, add an amazing search engine, Google. Type in a few key words and in just a second or two, thousands, even *millions*, of possible paths to explore are revealed. And how about YouTube for videos, for amusement or instruction. One estimate is that it would take you or me more than 90,000 years to view every video on You Tube!

You see, in just a few short decades, we got real, concrete access to exponentially increased information, and for just an ordinary person using an inexpensive mobile appliance and pretty much ubiquitous internet connectivity. And my words chosen here—*exponentially increased*—are hopelessly inadequate to describe the difference, the change in the accessibility of information taking place the last fifty years.

Are you feeling a bit sorry for me in my childhood? Perhaps so, but don’t! How about the Roman Catholic church, which—for centuries—would not allow lay people access to the Bible! Among other things, this was famously challenged by the famous Reformer Martin Luther, who translated the Bible into German. Or, how about feeling bad for William Tyndale of England, whose pioneering work to translate the Bible into English was opposed by England’s King Henry VIII. Tyndale was put to death by the King’s order—actually the penalty for everyone even *reading* Tyndale’s translation. Soon, though, the King changed his mind to suit his changed purposes and Tyndale’s version was made complete and published within a year or two of Tyndale’s execution. Can we say the English people lacked meaningful access before Tyndale? Sure! Interestingly, some scholars’ research indicates that Tyndale’s version of the Bible was foundational for a significant portion of the King James Bible...which has impacted many millions for centuries. Bravo!

You see, *access* is the key seed to fuller knowledge. And fuller knowledge can and does lead to power...or at least empowerment...including power that can upset people who currently hold the reins of power.

Yes, access is the key seed to fuller knowledge. My life has dramatically changed for the better since my early years which afforded relatively limited access to worthy researchable materials. That change has happened for many reasons, but a very key factor is the amount of information available to me now, the volume of which is now almost overwhelmingly large. And that radical change morphed about the year 2000. Yes, just go to Google. Yes, go to Amazon and quickly obtain a fresh, new, profound book made readily available to people the world over by the magical power of digital advances. The genie is out of the bottle. Indeed, the hyper-effective, 21st-century versions of the Bookmobile are only a few clicks away.

So, modern, digital access had made a radical difference for massive numbers of people—no question about it! But does all that access really mean that we are wiser? Better equipped? Well, not necessarily.

Yes, accessibility widens the full range of possibilities, not only a grand sweep of opportunities, but also provides the power of search engines and tools to make the research much easier *and* more fruitful! This accessibility makes the attentive, modern researcher the equivalent of the solitary genius detective of yesteryear. But this huge volume of research paths has significant drawbacks. Like the paralysis that can set in when presented a mind-boggling buffet of options. Like what hikers in the Rocky Mountains call false summits, where hikers think the goal is met when the real summit is elusively still far away. And like the unwise discarding of impeccable options found too soon or too familiar to seem valuable. Remember my discarding the Bible as a resource in my teen years? Sadly, no adult stepped in to challenge that!

So, here’s the mixed promise of this 21st century Bookmobile. Yes, these extraordinary developments in the human experience benefit so many—indeed, previously unimaginable research access! But mere access cannot and should not be equated with wisdom. Right, Walter? So, our pursuit of the Research-Wisdom-Action cycle continues, both here in our continuing episodes and in our future decision-making!

A&A: Application & Action

1. Have you widened your research scope to wisely consider and encompass all those research paths that resources like Amazon and Google provide? Provide evidence of that with two specific examples of areas where you have been significantly helped.

2. Where and how do you find book recommendations—beyond popular titles and bestseller lists? Whose voices do you listen to for guidance on what to read next? After answering, consider exploring two resources further: the Whitestone Podcast episode “Why Strong Leaders Devour Book Reviews” and Whitestone Bookshelf at whitestone.org/bookshelf.

3. Many of us are susceptible to “decision paralysis” or “false summits” or the discarding of valuable options because they feel “too soon” or “too familiar?” In your research approaches, are you susceptible to one or more of these, too? Elaborate on how you can avoid some of your experiences in the future.