From Inconceivable to Contagious

Harvard University psychologist Howard Gardner has a simple theory: people gravitate toward those who agree with them. Unlike the days of print and televised news, today's online environment enables us to avoid anyone who disagrees with us by going directly to the digital outlets of the like-minded. In short, it’s easy to find those who you agree with and unknowingly have your own opinions and prejudices reinforced.

My recent experience with the passage of Indiana's Religious Freedom Restoration Act exemplifies Gardner's theory. All week my Twitter, RSS, email, and Facebook feeds repeated the same facts and opinions that allied with my opinion—just as I am sure that the digital feeds of those who supported the opposite position repeated facts and opinions consistent with their stance.

Stepping back a few weeks later, it is a little scary to see how truly easy it is to avoid having a conversation with anyone who doesn’t agree with you.

It takes time and work to seek out and understand differing opinions.

In the past weeks I’ve made a concerted effort to read more deeply the opinions and ideas of those who I don’t agree with or with whom, at first glance, I don’t seem to have much in common. On the professional side, I’ve explored library activities and literature outside of the law librarianship arena. I’ve learned some things and found a new book to read—Jonah Berger’s Contagious: Why Things Catch On. Berger’s book, a fascinating read that explores the psychology of why ideas go viral, is the selection for “Libraries Read: 1 Book,” a program aimed at creating deeper connections among all libraries throughout Indiana and Michigan. Perhaps Contagious will be the basis for a column of mine one day.

In the meantime, I’ll leave you with one startling fact: only 7 percent of word-of-mouth conversation (the underlying driver of product success) happens online.

The most interesting effect of stepping out of your information silo is that many things that once seemed inconceivable start to seem possible and maybe even contagious. In this issue of AALL Spectrum, law librarians write about new legal research instruction models, new ways for libraries to support faculty engaged in empirical research, the formation of a special interest group within the Foreign, Comparative, and International Law Special Interest Section, and new ways that we can respond to challenging and potentially high-conflict patron interactions. The ideas discussed in these articles, which may have been inconceivable even a short time ago, certainly have the possibility of generating conversations that will spread widely among the AALL membership.

AALL members often advance compelling and diverse opinions about how to best move the organization and the profession forward. The theme of the 108th AALL Annual Meeting, The Power of Connection, presents the perfect platform for each of us to actively seek out and explore those whose opinions differ from our own and to learn new things. Perhaps this is the Annual Meeting to step out of your information silo by attending an education program or a meeting that you have never before attended or to engage in a conversation with a new person from a different special interest section.

I know I plan to do so.

I look forward to seeing you in Philadelphia and to hearing what you have to say.

Catherine A. Lemmer
calemmer@iupui.edu
www.aallnet.org/Blogs/spectrum-blog