A Brief Essay on Being an Informed Citizen

From the time we are born, we begin to acquire information, information that may help or harm our development, but it molds us into who we are. I will skip over what we can call the formative years when most of us figured out that a stovetop can sometimes be hot, and that a fork in a wall's electrical receptacle can be shocking, and that if you don't hold your breath under water, well, you get the idea.

In modern times, our reading has been an important source of information, but even in earlier times, distinguishing fact from fiction was always problematic. Oh, sure, there have been hoaxes going way back. Just ask H.L. Mencken (1880 – 1956), who, in 1917 and idling away his time waiting for the war in Europe to end, sought to amuse himself and his reading public by publishing a bogus history of the bathtub. After it was published and books were reprinting his faux history as fact, he spent the rest of his life trying to convince people that he made up the entire thing (See: A Neglected Anniversary), and never fully succeeded. Such are the risks of "fake news", especially when written by someone with gravitas. (A *gravita* is a contractual clause that allows a writer to publish screeds with no editorial intervention)

Even back then, there were always publishers trying to fool the reading public, and it was not always easy to verify if what one was reading was factual, or at least that the important information was accurate, even if there may have been embellishments. Publications sought readers, and good stories—and good writers—sold newspapers. During the time when more people travelled by ship, one reporter wrote of a shipwreck and included a detail: a cat that had been on board had survived. That fact drew readers to the newspaper. Publishers noticed, as did the reporters, and as a consequence, when reporting on a ship sinking, reporters would often include a cat surviving the catastrophe. A manufactured detail such as a cat is probably not important if the reason you are reading the article is to find out if a loved one was on the vessel, but people still like a good story.

The days of newspapers—at least printed ones—are growing short, but they have been replaced by an Internet daily tidal wave of words and images washing over us, and it is no surprise that we have become overwhelmed. Some of the daily on-line publications now tell you how long it will take to read the article. Years ago, even small towns often had two or three newspapers, each having its own slant or editorial bias, and people bought the paper that they most enjoyed—meaning the one they most often agreed with. In a one-newspaper town, an editor might offer an opposing viewpoint, often on the opposite page; thus was born the Op-Ed column.

But what does this have to do with being an informed citizen? To be informed, you must read (or listen to) not only reports and opinions with which you agree, but also those with which you disagree; otherwise you are, well, uninformed. And while you may disagree with a viewpoint, you must be willing to consider that the opposing viewpoint may have merit, or even that your own viewpoint may not be without its faults. Doubt is not a dirty word. This is the liberal mind at work. Not the leftist mind of the conservative's fever-dreams, but the mind of someone who is not so close-minded or certain as to shut out any discussion or consideration. Such adamantine positions of certainty are frequently also the province of the theological world.

But to be liberal-minded does not mean one has to be gullible. And it no longer takes a lot of effort to find out if something that doesn't sound correct may very well not be correct, or perhaps only partly correct, but in need of qualifying. To be a good citizen, you must be an informed citizen, and to be informed means that sometimes you may have to do a bit of homework, such as asking questions. And there are many reliable Internet sources that do some of the work for you, offering information to debunk reports that you think may be "fake news".

To start you off, you might try to remember this question, which dates back to the first century in Italy. A lawyer (of course!) by the name of Marcus Tullius Cicero is credited with first applying it to his law practice. And it must be a fair question, as it continues to be used by anyone seeking the truth of a matter. It is a Latin phrase,

familiar to many as “Cui bono”, pronounced KWEE-boh-no, and in English it means “To whom is it a benefit?” A fair question indeed. Be informed. It is to your benefit.