



The Death of 'Why?': The Decline of Questioning and the Future of Democracy

Andrea Batista Schlesinger

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The spirit of inquiry is the engine of democracy. The democratic process is nothing less than citizens regularly asking what kind of society they want to live in and whom they want to lead them. But more and more people are avoiding the whole messy business of questioning. Americans are instead being trained to look for ready-made answers, with potentially dire implications for the health of our society.

In this impassioned new book, Andrea Batista Schlesinger argues that we're besieged by cultural forces that urge us to avoid independent thought and critical analysis. The media reduces politics to a spectator sport, focusing on polls and personalities rather than issues and ideas. Schools teach to standardized tests—students learn to fill in the bubbles, not open their minds. “Financial literacy” courses have replaced civics classes, graduating smart shoppers rather than informed citizens. Even the Internet promotes habits that discourage inquiry. Regurgitating search-engine results becomes a substitute for genuine research and reflection. Social networks promote connection rather than engagement. With all the information available online, over a third of those younger than twenty-five say they get no news on a typical day, up from 25 percent in 1998.

The situation isn't hopeless. Batista Schlesinger spotlights individuals and institutions across the country that are working to renew a healthy sense of curiosity and skepticism, particularly in American's youth. It is, at this point, an uphill battle but one well worth undertaking. The Death of “Why?” offers both a penetrating socio-cultural critique of our current path and a way forward for cultivating inquiry and reinvigorating our democracy.

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