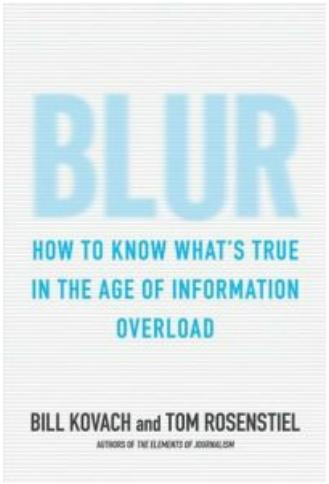

Book Blur

How to Know What's True in the Age of Information Overload

Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel
Bloomsbury USA, 2010
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Recommendation

With so much information available on the Internet, more news consumers are helping themselves to exactly the current events information they want, instead of letting the media determine what they see and hear. Average citizens can become better judges of the quality of the news reports they receive by practicing certain techniques that professional journalists use. These methods require the disciplined exercise of judgment, curiosity and skepticism. This illuminating book provides useful steps for identifying reliable journalists and news organizations, for instance, by evaluating their sources of information. Media veterans Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel illustrate many of their points with references to leading journalists and their reporting techniques. *BooksInShort* recommends their instructive book to busy professionals seeking effective ways to stay informed.

Take-Aways

- Journalists' role as "gatekeepers" who select the news is diminishing.
- Cable television and the Internet have added a flexible, self-service element to the public's consumption of news.
- People need a steady diet of news that is reliable, revelatory and relevant.
- To identify credible news reports, assess information the way journalists weigh it.
- The "skeptical way of knowing" is a six-step process to understand a subject fully.
- The steps are: Classify the content, determine its comprehensiveness, consider the source, appraise the evidence, assess the explanation and gauge the relevance.
- Content can be "journalism, propaganda, advertising, publicity, entertainment" or data.
- Don't believe conclusive reports based on incomplete or incomprehensible evidence.
- Three common types of journalism are based on verification, assertion and affirmation. A fourth type springs from slanted studies by interest groups.
- Until now, journalism's gatekeeper role hid its other jobs as eyewitness, fact checker, decoder, "sense-maker, empowerer, smart aggregator, forum organizer and role model."

Summary

More Information, Less Certainty

Self-service increasingly will characterize news consumption. Countless Internet-based sources of information now compete with traditional media such as newspapers, magazines and broadcast stations. Consumers have easy access to a massive supply of news, opinion, gossip and other information, including personal messages and images. Rather than relying on a newspaper or a TV station to stay informed, more people are creating personalized "news packages."

> "As we pick and choose from what is available on cable, online, in our email in-boxes and elsewhere, we are each creating our own news package."

This trend raises concerns about the reliability of publicly disseminated information. With so many sources, distinguishing the reliable ones from the rest is a challenge. Traditional media, which offer both news and ads, maintain "legacy" business models that are cracking under competitive pressure from websites that operate solely as ad media. In this way, the Internet has "decoupled" editorial content and advertising. Classified ad platform Craigslist and auction site eBay are just two Internet companies that attracted a large following without providing any information other than ads. As such online competitors have taken revenue from established media, employment has dropped in many newspaper, magazine and broadcast news operations, threatening their reliability and relevance. Finding alternate, equally credible, sources online is hard because the medium is so vast. The Web overwhelms many users with far more information than they can use.

> "Journalism used to be whatever journalists decided it was. Today, consumers have a greater role in the decision."

Fortunately, classifying and qualifying information correctly, regardless of its source, is a learnable skill. When Internet usage began surging in the 1990s, some observers worried about an "information gap" benefiting people with online access and punishing those without it. Now, the true gap in information intake exists between careful and careless consumers of news.

How to Convince Skeptics

Lay readers can employ journalistic techniques to assess information for themselves, rather than relying solely on news outlets. These methods essentially call for the practical exercise of skepticism. The best journalists constantly question what others tell them. They rely more on firsthand information than hearsay. They are enterprising professionals who vet the facts they publish, not "stenographers" who passively report data without questioning its validity. To assess purported facts as leading journalists do, follow the six stages of "the skeptical way of knowing": 1) classify the content, 2) determine its comprehensiveness, 3) consider the source, 4) appraise the evidence, 5) assess the explanation and 6) gauge the relevance.

> "News consumption has become a more proactive experience."

Categorizing content is the first step toward fully understanding what you see or hear. In a "news literacy" course at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, students learn to classify content as "journalism, propaganda, advertising, publicity, entertainment or raw information."

Four Styles of Journalism

Journalism is produced in four forms: the journalism of "verification, assertion, affirmation" and "interest-group" focus. Many news organizations distribute more than one form.

> "Journalism that exposes what is being kept hidden or secret is so central, so essential, to a democratic government that its importance is fundamental to the new journalism as well as the old."

Professionals who adhere to the traditional journalism of verification cherish accuracy, while practitioners of the journalism of assertion put a higher priority on speedy communication than thoughtful editing or reporting. This form of journalism became widespread during the 1980s and '90s. A major catalyst was the advent of nonstop cable TV news programming, 24 hours a day and seven days a week, led by Cable News Network (CNN). When news became available all the time, many TV viewers stopped waiting until dinner for a daily dose of broadcast news. Since the '90s, the web's growth has fortified the media culture of continuous, endless news delivery.

> "Journalism is more apt to do stories people are already talking about rather than those that focus on what is being ignored."

Purveyors of the journalism of affirmation selectively convey facts to affirm what their audience already believes. Given this lax analysis, consumers should watch for "an inherent passivity" on the part of its practitioners, whose priority is reporting information immediately after it becomes available, usually without the filter of formal editing. Studies show that more than half the talk on cable TV shows is unscripted, a reflection of cable's emphasis on immediacy. This passive form of journalism is embedded in the Internet. Many online outlets post data on their sites and later edit it based on audience responses. Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, exemplifies this evolving, audience-based editing process by letting users revise content on its webpages.

> "When multiple sources use the same language to describe an issue or event...be alert to the likelihood of manipulation."

Empirical fact finding also is not a priority of the journalism of affirmation, which assigns greater authority to its practitioners. These journalists focus not on reporting but on celebrating their audiences' opinions on a range of topics. Their readers, listeners or viewers come to them not for neutral information but for guidance and support in a shared cause or belief. They and their media purveyors often share a belief that they know how to handle problems that actually don't have clear solutions. Fragmentary reporting and minimal contextual background characterizes the journalism of affirmation, while special-interest journalism flows from tainted sources, such as biased, industry-funded studies designed to resemble objective research.

Completeness and Credibility

To determine if their information about a subject is complete, professional journalists use a checklist of who, what, when, where, why and how. A complete news article identifies who did what, and tells when, where, why and how it happened. Some media go further and publish lengthy reports to make sense of the news, re-examine the evidence for past claims or describe emerging paradigms. Newspapers, in particular, have adopted such enhanced storytelling to distinguish themselves from media that rely on standard reporting or opinion.

> "Look for journalism that has the humility to ask questions that cannot yet be answered, that acknowledges what it does not know and that does not infer conclusions it cannot prove."

News media use a variety of information sources to make their reports credible. A rich mix of sources usually makes a report more believable. To measure a news report's quality, evaluate the depth and variety of its sourcing, including eyewitness accounts, secondhand information and expert opinions. Reporters often don't cite sources when they write about events they have seen firsthand though they may need other sources to corroborate what they've witnessed.

Sifting Evidence, Finding Proof

Two-time Pulitzer Prize winner Homer Bigart covered World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War for *The New York Times*. He brought what he called "portable ignorance" to his evidence gathering. He abhorred mere assumption. Instead of reporting only what military officers said in press briefings, Bigart reported firsthand from battles and compared mission results to official expectations. Bigart's superb articles were detailed and multidimensional. Of course, not everyone can be a war correspondent. But many readers can hone their ability to distinguish excellent news reports from poor ones, and to tell reliable news organizations from the rest, by applying portable ignorance to the news, or refusing to settle for media assumptions. When you read a report, evaluate the quality of its evidence by taking four steps:

1. **Identify the nature and the source of the evidence** – How did it originate? Is it secondhand or firsthand? Are the sources named or unnamed?
2. **Assess the integrity of the evidence** – Has anyone subjected it to testing and verification? Has anyone discovered, or even sought, contradictory evidence?
3. **Consider the conclusiveness of the evidence** – Is it adequate to support any conclusion? Incomplete or irrelevant evidence (even if true) can fail to suffice as indisputable proof.
4. **Evaluate the conclusion and the evidence that supposedly supports it** – Does the evidence point to one clear conclusion or to several possible explanations?

Good Habits for News Consumers

Watch for untested, unproven assumptions in the news. Use the "null hypothesis" approach: A scientific researcher seeks the opposite of what he or she truly believes and tries to prove it. When researchers find a valid null hypothesis, they may switch to a more productive course of inquiry. News consumers should expect similar disciplined objectivity from professional editors and reporters. Presentation of a null hypothesis, or alternative explanation, enhances the credibility of any news report about an incident or a development with a probable but unconfirmed cause.

> "Ironically, as the press began to worry more about how to please its audience, the audience began to have doubts about the professionalism of the press."

Look for errors of omission. For example, information was missing in the initial reports that some coal miners survived a methane gas explosion at the Sago Mine in West Virginia in 2006. News reports said 12 men had survived, but they had not; in fact, a total of 13 men were killed in the blast. The false news reports about survivors cited mine managers' hopeful misstatements, but they did not cite any official confirmation by a government authority. Those who spread the inaccurate story of Sago Mine survivors failed in their journalistic duty "to notice what was missing" in their reporting.

> "The challenge for newsroom organizations is that they are both a declining business in one platform and an emerging business in another. But they think largely like an old business."

Careful consumption of the news requires continuous consideration of its relevance, not just its reliability. Try to explain a news story to a friend. If offering a clear explanation is impossible, you may not have enough relevant information. Identify news that matters by focusing on your own priority list of 10 topics worth following. To determine a story's relevance, judge the depth of the reporting: Does the coverage offer substantial new information or just a minor update?

The Journalism of the Future

Average citizens increasingly fill the "gatekeeper" role that professional journalists traditionally played, selectively giving more attention to certain types of topics and less to other kinds of coverage. More journalism consumers are "news grazers" who review headlines periodically all day using a variety of media and devices, like mobile phones. Yet journalism will not disappear. Instead, the public will demand that journalists perform other functions more intensively as their gatekeeper task recedes. Eight other roles will become more prominent in the future:

1. **"Authenticator"** – The press will do more authentication of reported facts and will gather evidence in more transparent ways. In the information age, news consumers want to know not only the evidence in a report but also the process of uncovering it.
2. **"Sense maker"** – With updated news available all the time, even the slightest change in a situation can command a headline. This promotes a fragmented understanding of the world. Journalists can transcend "incremental" coverage by connecting threads in multiple reports to produce broader coverage that makes sense of the news.
3. **"Investigator"** – The news media traditionally have served as a public watchdog, alert to possible government malfeasance. Some reporters, editors and producers will play this role more vigorously, while others will avoid such verification-based journalism.
4. **"Witness bearer"** – The presence of the press at public meetings is a pillar of democracy. It shows elected officials that they are doing public business in full view. New ways of covering local government may involve partnerships between news media and part-time correspondents with no formal journalism training.
5. **"Empowerer"** – More journalists will empower their audience by providing self-service tools for learning about any subject. Journalists offering stories online now can choose among many reporting assists, like links to related data.
6. **"Smart aggregator"** – Collating online content allows news organizations to purvey information about the best websites and to offer unique news-filtering services.
7. **"Forum organizer" –** News outlets now have opportunities to distinguish themselves by producing fact-based discussions of public issues and presenting a diversity of opinions.
8. **"Role model" –** More professional journalists will become role models for citizens enlisted by the news media, part time, to extend their coverage base.

> "It is seductive, in the era of television and particularly live cable television, to be tricked into the simplicity of imagining that seeing is believing."

These roles have been around for some time, but the role of gatekeeper overshadowed them until recently. Because today's audience is more involved in news selection, journalists now must devote their energy to other functions that deliver more value. As a result, instead of approaching obsolescence, journalism actually "is becoming more complex."

About the Authors

Bill Kovach was Washington bureau chief for *The New York Times* and editor of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. **Tom Rosenstiel** led *Newsweek*'s congressional reporting and was a media critic for the *Los Angeles Times* and MSNBC.
