

A brief journey in search of trusted information

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ONE OF THE most serious problems facing the world today is the over-abundance of unreliable information, a condition sometimes referred to as info-obesity. Not good. In *Too Big To Know*, David Weinberger of Harvard calls this a crisis of information.¹ And it seems technology, in particular the internet, may be to blame. It has opened up the information floodgates. For the most part, this has exposed us to new sources of information and made our lives immeasurably richer.

But it has also had the opposite effect, muddying the waters, overloading us, and contaminating and polluting debate. There is so much information today, from so many sources, that it is hard to process and ever harder to know what to read, or trust. By that, I mean information which is credible, reliable, verifiable, and authenticated. We travel without a knowledge compass and stumble across both the good and the bad. Unquestionably, this is holding us back. We need help.

To that end, I would like to discuss some new approaches to addressing the problem, starting with a brief tour of the changing role of public information and knowledge.

Where do ideas and information come from?

The story of the wide dissemination of information in Europe largely dates from the 6th century, when monks and nuns at Christian cathedral schools or monastic schools taught classes

mostly concerned with prayer and the scriptures. Earlier still, the madrasas of the Arab world oversaw the study and memorisation of the Koran, extending this in time to the study of astronomy and mathematics.

Towards the end of the first millennium, rulers and city governments sought to encourage wider participation in learning, believing society would benefit from the scholarly expertise and knowledge generated by professionalising education. That led to the founding of the first universities in Europe: the University of Bologna in 1088, the University of Paris in 1150, and the University of Oxford in 1167. However, most were still taught at classes in churches.

Surprisingly, borne into this thirst for knowledge was an early appreciation of the importance of academic freedom, first codified by the University of Bologna into an academic charter, the *Constitutio Habita*, in 1158. This charter guaranteed the right of a travelling scholar to unhindered passage in the interests of education. That academic freedom, much developed, remains at the heart of every university worthy of its name and true to its traditions.

The era of the mass dissemination of information started with the invention in 1450 of the Gutenberg press, which in 1454 printed the Gutenberg Bible, the first major book to be printed and widely distributed. (The English translation came 25 years later, in 1475.) By 1500, printing presses throughout Western Europe were producing more than 20 million volumes, and there was a flowering of new ideas and debate. Prior to the invention of the printing press, only the literate elite had access to a small number of handwritten books.

The technological development of the mechanical press permanently altered the structure of society, giving the wider public relatively unrestricted access to information and a consequent sharp increase in literacy.

A watershed moment for the Catholic Church came with the publication of Luther's Ninety-Five Theses in 1517 and its wide distribution and readership. Although Luther's arguments were still conducted within the frame of religion and faith, he challenged the conduct of the Church by publishing the extensive malpractice by priests and the abuse of power through the selling and buying of clerical office and overbloated church hierarchy.

The impact and debate surrounding those ideas started to loosen the monopoly the Church held over education and learning, as well as the power it derived from its privileged access to knowledge.

In 1620, the English philosopher Francis Bacon wrote: 'The invention of printing, firearms and the nautical compass changed the whole face and state of the world.'

Yet curiously — and more of this later — even as early as 1702, the jurist and philosopher Christian Thomasius was warning about information overload. He compared the overproduction of books to 'an epidemic'.

Birth of newspapers

The evolution of printing, combined with the thirst for knowledge, culminated in an idea born in a London coffee house. In January 1692, Edward Lloyd, who owned the Lloyd's Coffee House in the City of London, started a weekly newsletter, 'Ships Arrived at and Departed from several Ports of England', as a reliable source of information for the merchants and insurance underwriters who met to negotiate insurance coverage for trading vessels. The merchants needed high-grade information they could rely upon to do business.

In 1696, it became *Lloyd's News*, becoming *Lloyd's List* in 1734, and is the oldest continuously published newspaper in the world.

In 1764, Lloyd's *Register of Ships* introduced the grading of the condition of vessels: ship hulls were graded by a lettered scale (A being the best), and ship's fittings (masts, rigging, and other equipment) were graded by number (1 being the best). Thus, the best classification was A1, from which the expression 'A1' is derived.

The foundations of the Ivory Tower

The combination of the birth of universities, the printing press and newspapers heralded the Age of Enlightenment in Europe, while the cultural movement of intellectuals beginning in the late 17th and 18th century Europe emphasised the importance of reason and individualism rather than tradition. This new Age of Reason sought to advance knowledge through the scientific method.

Yet, the first purely secular institutions were not founded until 1826, with the founding of University College, London. And it was the first university to admit women on equal terms to men.

In the United States, Harvard University had operated since 1650, although its initial purpose was to train Congregationalist and Unitarian clergy. Its curriculum gradually secularised during the 19th century, becoming a modern research university in the early 20th century.

Reflecting the power over the years of the meddlesome church, the universities, academies and laboratories had gradually retreated or distanced themselves from the general public. University campuses often reflected a siege mentality and were built apart from the community, often behind defensive walls. As part of that distancing process, academics also developed their own language as they wrote primarily for their peers. That language became increasingly different, difficult and jargonised, rendering it largely unintelligible to the general public.

Sadly, that Ivory Tower or Walled Garden mentality remains largely in place in many institutions to this day. University critics claim they have become too costly to run, complacent, self-serving and insufficiently exposed to competition and to market forces.² Even worse, many universities still allow the vast majority of their research to be locked behind the paywalls of the academic journal publishers, blocking public access to that knowledge, despite being paid for by the taxpayers.

So, why did the mass media not seek to better disseminate that knowledge to the public? Perhaps because it, too, could not understand, and did not have time to translate, the language of scientific findings and research. And if they could, those findings rarely fitted with the ‘news’ criteria of the news editor who sought ‘good yarns’ that would be entertaining, novel, have human interest — especially scandals involving celebrity and royalty — and at some level involved conflict.

In addition, the gathering and presentation of information by academics and journalists is radically different. Scientists have (and demand) time to think, reflect and maximise their academic investigation, exploration and freedom. In contrast, journalists are time-poor. They need to work fast to secure the ‘scoop’, to be first and beat the rivals. And many are even prepared to take shortcuts (such as phone hacking) to achieve that.

The methodology of good academic research involves rigorous fact-finding, peer assessment and codes of conduct, and it tends to use careful, accurate language to report findings; while the mainstream media, meanwhile, prefers to seek the widest possible audience through dumbing down language, and ‘angling’ stories and headlines to achieve maximum impact.

So, the worlds of academia and journalism have drifted apart, with each not understanding the other, often based on the lack of a common language, different research methodology, and divergent aims. One is focused on getting knowledge right, the other on being first and attracting as many eyeballs as possible.

Nature abhors a vacuum

The demise of newspapers has been exhaustively documented elsewhere so I will not dwell on that here. However, journalism's tipping point arrived from 2000 onwards when media companies, facing an implosion of their advertising business models, stripped costs out, with many newsrooms closing their doors and 25% of editorial staff laid off. In the past six years, the number of newsroom staff in Australia has halved to 8,000. And among the first to go were the specialist reporters, with only two science editors now left in Australia. Newsrooms are largely drained of journalists with knowledge, experience and wisdom. At best, general reporters get time to do some elementary desk research, place a couple of calls and write up 'the story'. Then they move to the next 'job'. Those left are stretched and provide shallow offerings for readers. No wonder readers look elsewhere for deeper understanding to help them make better sense of the world and its complexity.

Yet, between 2000 and 2010, the number of public relations (PR) jobs rose by nearly 63%, and by 2020 is set to rise by another 21%.

What are these expanding PR companies producing? 'They curate, edit and disseminate content on behalf of a business,' says Biserka Anderson of marketing magazine *Sparksheet*. 'They merge traditional PR and journalism skills, transforming [traditional] marketing departments into content marketing departments, much like Newsrooms. Now, branded journalists write the news and announcements that reach readers directly for the media.'

Anderson concludes: 'In my experience, the tensions between being a journalist and being a marketer have disappeared and the boundaries between the two fields have long blurred.'

Sparksheet magazine ends with this advice to PRs and marketers:

Go directly to your audience. Journalists are no longer the primary conduit between PR people and the public.

Be quick on your feet. In the Internet age, PR specialists must be quicker than ever on their feet when it's time to post news and announcements.³

Is the PR/branded content strategy to replace journalism working?

The most recent analysis in 2010 by the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism at the University of Technology, Sydney analysed five days of ten hard-copy newspapers and found nearly 55% of stories were driven by some form of public relations.

The *Sydney Daily Telegraph* came out on top of the league ladder, with 70% of stories triggered by public relations. The *Sydney Morning Herald* got the wooden spoon with (only) 42% PR-driven stories for that week.

No wonder Australian newspapers carry more PR content: the number of newsroom staff has halved in the last six years, while the number of PRs has increased by a further 20%.

In addition to PR or branded content, we also have a burgeoning of information and data from governments, businesses, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, blog posts, instant messages, email, and so on.

We all value and enjoy easy access to all this information, but how do we draw out the credible and reliable information from all the noise? How do we sort out the 'good stuff' from the misinformation, or the information 'contaminated' by commercial or ideological messages? With the sheer volume of content, it is becoming increasingly difficult to check the credibility or provenance of the source.

We badly lack a system that rates or ranks the credibility of information and the expertise of the knowledge creator.

So, where could credible information come from?

The Conversation is a response to this crisis of journalism. It is a new approach to sourcing content from authors who really know their stuff — those academics and researchers with deep knowledge of their subject.

These scholars are not driven by short-term or proprietary interests, nor are they subjected to intervention and control by those who might not like what they are researching. Instead, they are tasked with trying to make sense of our world, and to understand the complexity of our economic, social and environmental challenges, as well as to offer solutions to those problems, without political or commercial spin.⁴

As Stefan Collini of Cambridge University wrote in 2006 in his book *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain*:

One way to think about the distinctive role of the university is to see them as institutions which are primarily devoted to extending and deepening human understanding. This is a pretty outrageous idea: no other institution has this as its *primary* purpose.⁵

That, in sum, is the primary purpose of The Conversation. As a journalism project, we collaborate with academics and turn the university into a giant newsroom. After all, the skills of the researcher and academic are very similar to those of an investigative journalist: they both need to understand, sift through information and data, search for veracity, distil, provide context and make sense. But the academic goes one step further; in addition to understanding problems, they also seek solutions.

The question was, how to unlock that knowledge, research and expertise in a way that the public could understand and share.

Until The Conversation's launch in 2011 there was no widely-used mechanism through which the universities could deliver on that 'primary purpose'. The Conversation has 20

commissioning editors who work closely with nearly 8,000 academics, each one a specialist in their field.

Each author is assigned an editor to help ensure the content is timely, understandable, and useable. The ‘translation process’ includes a Readability Checker software program we developed to ensure articles avoid the use of overly complex language. We want to allow the widest possible audience to access our content.

Yet that is not enough. In the digital age, it is no longer sufficient to simply assert the reliability or trustworthiness of information. It must be open to testing and verification and comply with the highest standards of information delivery. Trust must be earned. So, what are The Conversation’s protocols to deliver trusted, credible content?

Every author must provide a disclosure statement of all their expertise (papers, books, research), the source of their funding and any potential conflicts of interest that may raise questions about the integrity of their article. And finally, all content is jointly signed off by the author and the collaborating editor to avoid the introduction of any errors through the editing process.

Once editor and author are ready to publish, the content is published directly to the public through a platform we built from scratch to reflect our working practices. That platform allows The Conversation and its authors to bypass the mainstream media and its gatekeepers with their own agendas and interests. Yet because all content is published under Creative Commons, the rest of the media is very happy to have free access to high-quality content.

In sum, The Conversation is a new journalism model that attempts to deliver information based on deep knowledge, codified behaviour, codes of conduct and a commitment to delivering the highest quality content free of commercial, or

political interference or bias. This might be called ‘knowledge-based journalism’.

As a democracy project, The Conversation is committed to the public’s right to have access to verifiable and credible information, one of the key foundations of an informed and civilised society. The need for reliable information was, after all, the common currency that the merchants of the Lloyd’s coffee houses sought in order to trade, and that in turn spawned the world’s first newspaper.

Towards a new information ‘gold standard’

If business has required and developed many ‘standards’ or protocols to provide standardised information, why not the media?

Lloyd’s *Register of Ships* provided the first verified statements on ‘the state’ or condition of each vessel. To assess the creditworthiness of the world’s major companies and economies, we now have the credit rating agencies Standard & Poor and Moody’s.

In the world of information, Google publishes guidelines ‘to help us maintain fairness and consistency when determining which sites we include’. In using these guidelines, it then ranks sites: ‘Publishers who strive to uphold the basic principles of good journalism will enjoy better ranking than those who spend their time looking for loopholes they can exploit.’

In another attempt at accreditation, the Reporters Without Borders organisation produces a Press Freedom Index that ranks every country’s performance on press freedom against an agreed checklist.

Even restaurants have their Michelin ratings, while in the United Kingdom, dog owners have their Crufts prizes that measure every attribute of each breed.

So, why not the media? I believe we need a globally agreed ‘standard’ for the accreditation of information: one that

provides full transparency about the source of information and its funding. If we don't provide the public with a way to discern between information sources, then the public will take the matter into their own hands and look to other ways of ordering and sorting their information, including making use of branded content, PR, social media, religion and extreme politics. Some of these might be fine, but not all of them.

We would like to explore with others a methodology towards establishing a new gold standard for information. And whatever approach, we would like to think The Conversation could mount a compelling case for an A1 rating.

Endnotes

- 1 D Weisberger, *Too big to know: rethinking knowledge now that the facts aren't the facts, experts are everywhere, and the smartest person in the room is the room*, Basic Books, London, 2012.
- 2 P Coaldrake & L Stedman, *Raising the stakes: Gambling with the future of universities*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 2013.
- 3 B Anderson, 'When journalism and marketing converge', *Sparksheet*, retrieved from <http://sparksheet.com/when-journalism-and-marketing-converge/>
- 4 Coaldrake & Stedman, op. cit.
- 5 S Collini, *Absent minds: intellectuals in Britain*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006.