Understanding Information Sources

In today's information society we can find information on almost anything we want. Increasingly sophisticated technology makes it easier than ever to find and access what we need. However, it also presents us with a dilemma: how do we choose the right resources from this often overwhelming selection? This article presents an overview of information sources, which will help you to choose the right source and avoid information overload.

What is information?

- Information is knowledge gained or given; facts; news or the communicating or receiving of knowledge. [1]
- Information can mean different things to different people, depending on their particular circumstances, but most accept that in general terms at least, information is a means of communicating knowledge, helping us to find out what we need to know. The information source we choose will always depend on the quantity and quality of information required.
- We use information constantly, often without realising it, to make decisions and judgements about all aspects of our lives. For example, if a manager is planning a new initiative on flexible working, they may research other similar organisations to see what has worked or not worked, and consult current legislation to check what employees are entitled to. Similarly, if we decide to take a trip, we may look at rail or road maps online, consult a train timetable for departure times, and listen or watch the travel news to check for possible delays to the journey.

Formats

Information is published in a range of formats and it is important to select and use those appropriate to your needs. What you use will depend on your circumstances, including the time and technology available. Below is a brief overview of the three main formats:

1. Print
Print is simply the paper (hard copy) form of information. Books, serials, official publications and some specialised sources are usually published in print form.

2. Electronic
Electronic information resources refer to anything that is recorded, stored and retrieved using computer technology. Examples of electronic information sources include CDs, DVDs and all online sources including searchable databases.

3. Audio-Visual
Audio-visual (AV) resources consist of sound and visual images. These include items such as television programmes, motion pictures, music recordings and slides.

Note: The information you seek may exist in any one or more of these formats. While more and more information exists in electronic and audio-visual format, significant amounts of information are readily (and sometimes only) available in print format.

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Information sources: primary and secondary
Information is usually categorised into two main types: primary and secondary.

- Primary sources of information come directly from a person or organisation – they are completely original and have not been altered in any way. Examples of primary sources include: patents, diaries, newspaper articles, artefacts, photographs, transcripts of conversations or interviews, speeches, music, art, legislation and policy, novels, poems, plays, parliamentary papers.

- Secondary sources of information interpret and comment on primary information. Examples of secondary sources include: books or articles that summarise the work of others, literature reviews and biographies.

It is important to distinguish between the two in order to critically evaluate the information. If the information comes from a source that is five or six times removed from the original (primary) source, it is easy for ideas to be misinterpreted or for details to be lost.

Information sources
We have greater access to a wider array of information sources than ever before, and listed below are the main types of information source, which may be available in print, audio-visual, and/or electronic format:

- Books
One of the most commonly used information sources, books can be either fiction (i.e. a work of the imagination) or non-fiction (i.e. fact-based). Non-fiction books provide in-depth detail on a subject or a general overview, so it is important to think about how much information you want before choosing a book. Most books will have contents pages, indexes and chapter headings which will help you quickly evaluate whether or not it meets your needs. It is also important to remember that, for printed books at least, the publication process can be lengthy, so check that the information is current enough for your needs.

- Reference works
These include dictionaries, encyclopaedias, almanacs, bibliographies and directories. Many of these reference works are now available online as well as in hard copy and are excellent for finding introductory information, topic overviews, definitions, statistics, facts and signposts to other information sources quickly.

- Serials
Serials (also known as periodicals) include newspapers, magazines and journals – anything that is published at regular intervals. They are an excellent source of current information, presenting the latest thinking in easily digestible chunks. However, the short length of most articles often prevents the author from exploring the subject in great depth. Newspapers and magazines are aimed at a more general readership, while some serials cover a wide subject area, and others (such as trade publications) focus on a particular subject or industry. As with books, many serials are also published electronically (online) – some are free to access while others require a subscription.

- Websites
A website is a collection of web pages which reside on the 'World Wide Web'. Thousands of

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new websites are created every day, offering a vast quantity of information of varying value. On the one hand this is great, as it means most of the information you need is at your fingertips. However, if your search terms are vague, the quantity and quality of information returned can be either overwhelming or disappointing. Well-defined search strategies and excellent evaluation skills are required to use the internet effectively.

- **Official/government publications and legislation**
  These include parliamentary publications, such as command papers, legislation bills, acts and statutes, debates and reports; and non-parliamentary publications (which are produced by government departments, ministries and other official bodies) – these may include press releases, books, articles, newsletters, reports and statistics. Most UK official publications are published by the Stationery Office. [2] They can also be found online in official websites such as Directgov. [3] UK legislation can be found at the Office of Public Sector Information. [4]

- **Specialised sources**
  Specialised sources provide unique, scholarly or historically valuable information. Examples include conference papers, theses, dissertations, private papers, diaries, manuscripts, letters, photos, maps, brochures, pamphlets.

- **People**
  Other people, especially those with unique experience or expertise are a valuable but frequently overlooked source of information. If you know the right people to talk to, they can often provide you with the information you need quickly and easily, helping save valuable research time and effort.

**Which source?**
Which information source you choose ultimately depends on what information you need, why, and how much time you have to spend on finding and using it. You may wish to use a variety of sources, but when choosing between them, the main considerations include:

- **how current** the information needs to be: magazines, journals and websites may be the best sources of current information, as books take much longer to write and publish
- **how detailed** the information needs to be: if you are looking for in-depth information, books may provide the detail you are looking for
- **how much time** you have available: some sources (e.g. books) may take longer to find and use than others (e.g. websites)
- **how authoritative** the information needs to be: books, subject/industry specific serials, official publications and specialised sources are generally the best sources of authoritative information
- **how readily available** the source is: it may be easier to access or acquire some sources than others, for example it will probably be easier to read an article from, say, the Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians online than it would be to buy it from your local newsagent
- **how much it will cost**: for example, you may be able to read the articles you need online for free, rather than paying for a copy or subscription to the magazine
Conclusion
Wherever we look, information surrounds us: on road signs, in newspapers, on television and computer screens. We spend much of our lives processing information and deciding how to use it, and in today's information age, it is often the only tangible product we work with, making the ability to find and use the right information critical to professional success.