How to Read a Large Amount of Information

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The incredible and growing amount of information available nowadays presents us with specific challenges we need to overcome first, if we want to be able to understand, foresee, warn about, and finally adequately answer accumulating dangers, threats, risks or more broadly changes and uncertainties. Our information age is indeed characterised by what Martin Hilbert called the "global information explosion" ("Digital Technology & Social Change" University of California Course, 2015), when we constantly face “information overload” (among many others, Bertram Gross, The Managing of Organizations, 1964; Alvin Toffler, Future Shock, 1970; also Stanley Milgram, “The experience of living in cities”, Science, 167, 1461-1468, 1970).

Google estimated in 2010 that 129,864,880 books had then been published (Leonid Taycher, “Books of the world, stand up and be counted! All 129,864,880 of you...” 5 Aug 2010). Wikipedia estimates that “approximately 2,200,000” books were published each year across the world. Meanwhile, it is almost frightening to look live at the constantly growing number of internet website: 1,080,387,230+ on 15 Sept 2016 (internet live stats).

Those are general figures, but they are also representative of what we must face when we work on a specific topic, because we have to deal with all the relevant knowledge and understanding accumulated. To this we must, most of the time, add current unfolding events
and facts. For example, if one wants to start working on an issue related to Libya, a simple google search on the word Libya returns 224,000,000 results. A larger theme, such as energy, returns 1,340,000,000 results.

If we take already filtered information, such as the bibliography of a PhD thesis, we nonetheless could get a 14 pages list of scholarly books and articles (approximately 336 texts) or more and 49 pages of references to archival material (corresponding approximately to 4/5 large storage boxes of documents and 12 CD-Rom of digitalized text documents – the examples are from my PhD, as, de facto, I knew the quantities hidden behind the bibliographical references). A “simple” reading list for one topic for a Master or PhD course often covers at least ten pages (e.g. Princeton, International Relations 2007, approx. 200 books and articles).

This is a lot to read, most often in an always too short amount of time. And we are only focusing here on written media, when time must also be made for other media such as videos, audio media, and social network exchanges.

How can we thus face this challenge, and read efficiently and usefully for our purpose, and more generally for analysis and understanding of political, geopolitical, and international relations’ issues.* We shall first stress that the aim is understanding and that accumulation of knowledge is only a means to this end. We shall then focus on purposeful reading of classically written academic and scientific texts (including articles, books, reports, monographs etc.), and see why and how their structure are both crucial and helpful, stressing very practical ways to read. We shall then turn to other type of written texts, namely newspaper articles and primary materials (speeches, official documents, etc) and finally stress a hard way to sort through useful or not documents.**

The aim is quality understanding not accumulation of quantity of knowledge

In our field – and in many related others – the first and absolutely crucial idea to keep in mind is that, initially, what we seek to achieve is NOT to accumulate a large quantity of knowledge, but to develop a proper understanding of a topic, question or issue, however loosely defined it may be before you start reading anything.

Knowledge is of course fundamental, but it is a means to an end. Knowledge will thus be a building block for the construction of your understanding.
Keeping this idea in mind will help you overcoming – at least partly – anxiety about what you do not know. What must matter to you is to know enough to develop a good understanding of the topic you are studying, as well as, in the case of anticipation, to allow you thinking out of the box.

We are not trying to hoard knowledge, nor do we aim at showing off how knowledgable we are. We read to understand at best something (and hopefully, also, meanwhile, we enjoy it).

Even if you were working in tactical intelligence to prevent terrorist attacks, for example, where at one stage you would need to know – ideally – everything to make sure you will not miss an attack that is being prepared, before to reach this step – which fundamentally belongs to the monitoring and surveillance phases (see Helene Lavoix, “Horizon Scanning and Monitoring For Anticipation: Definition and Practice”, RTAS, 22 June 2012) – you would first need to develop an understanding of the terrorists’ strategies, their beliefs, their motivations, previous modes of operations, etc... It is this initial fundamental phase related to understanding that is our primary concern here. Moreover, even during the monitoring and surveillance phase, you would also need to focus your reading on these useful pieces of information relevant to your task, i.e. preventing a terrorist attack. Thus, even in that case, quality understanding of information primes over blind quantity accumulation and reading still matters.

Reading classically scholarly written documents

This may come as a surprise to you, but, to read usefully and efficiently, we only relatively rarely read documents, be it books, reports, articles, memos or even short briefs, from A to Z. Most of the time, the pleasure of reading all the words of a written document is only reserved for leisure and novels, poetry, etc. In a work environment, reading every word is impossible – and potentially not very useful either. This may not be very nice for the author, who has spent months and sometimes years researching and writing, but this is the way it is, and the only way forward considering the breadth of accumulated knowledge. And, do not worry, most authors also do the same; they skim through texts for their own purpose.
However, purposeful reading is only possible because we can rely on a normative typical structure for scholarly written work, which reflects millennia of scholarly work and grounds the quality of written documents. It is this classical structure or more exactly what we assume is implied by and contained within it that allows speeding reading by taking in the gist of a book or article, or a focus on very specific points contained in the text, which may be of particular interest to the specific issue or problem we try to understand.

Should this structure not be respected, or not entail what we assume is behind it, purposeful reading and speeding reading would become much more difficult, or slower, if not impossible. As a result, we shall read texts with different origins and structures in a different way, as we shall see very practically below.

To continue reading (2307 supplementary words), become a member of The Red (Team) Analysis Society, or register for an online course. If you are already a member, please login (don’t forget to refresh the page). Trainees can access the page through “Fundamental Skills” in your course area. If you want to read free articles, look for our open access publications.

Notes

* We shall not address here technologically-based supports (besides simple searches), which are in themselves an entire topic and most of the time, anyway, demand some amount of reading to be properly implemented. Furthermore analysts want, like and need to keep a mastery of their subject matter, thus knowing how to read remains a crucial skill.

**The skills transmitted in this article were first taught to me by my lecturers at university and then resulted from more than twenty years of practice in research as well as analysis.

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