Book Review: Blur: How to Know What's True in the Age of Information Overload by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel (*Bloomsbury USA*; 2010)

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"Curation is knowledge," is one of the most poignant quotes from the book *Blur: How to Know What's True in the Age of Information Overload*. Today, we are inundated with a constant stream of information and without curation, we would drown in data. Insights like this make *Blur* a highly absorbing book about the importance of information literacy, but interestingly the term information literacy is never used. Instead, the authors promote a "tradecraft of verification." The tradecraft was developed by two seasoned journalists, Bill Kovach, former Washington bureau chief of the New York Times, and Tom Rosenstiel, a journalist with over thirty years of experience. Kovach and Rosenstiel aim to educate readers about the realities of truth seeking in the age of information. They explore how journalism has evolved from a profession centered on the search for truth and an obligation to accurate reporting, to the journalism of today which is built around the need to fill a 24 hour news day, with less emphasis on the discovery of truth. Complicating things further are the numerous news organizations practicing a variety of types of journalism. Some of these news organizations manipulate information in order to appeal to their readership. Therefore, the news consumer is often faced with competing truths and may be ill equipped to identify fallacies. Kovach and Rosenstiel state it is a civic responsibility to filter news in order to discover truth, but the truth seeking skills required to be a responsible citizen have been mostly untaught. Thus, Kovach and Rosenstiel's propose a new way of thinking about news, "the way of skeptical knowing."

Questions to Ask

The way of skeptical knowing is based on readers asking themselves six questions when they consider a source of information. Those questions are:

- What kind of content am I encountering?

- Is the information complete; and if not, what is missing?

- Who or what are the sources, and why should I believe them?

- What evidence is presented, and how was it tested or vetted?

- What might be an alternative explanation or understanding?

- Am I learning what I need to?

The authors elucidate these six questions by applying them to actual news stories, stories where the truth often was ignored or misidentified by a journalist who did not ask themselves one or more of these questions. The authors then identify four types of journalism: the journalism of verifica-

tion, journalism of assertion, journalism of affirmation, and interest group journalism. The majority of the book explores the six ways of skeptical knowing, using the types of journalism to demonstrate their usefulness. For example, the authors use the Bush Administration's claim that Iraq held weapons of mass destruction from 2002 to 2003 to characterize the journalism of assertion and identify the advantages of the ways of skeptical knowing. Kovach and Rosenstiel define the journalism of assertion as a model of journalism that values immediacy over accuracy, where journalists unintentionally work with the belief that the truth will be vetted over time. In the case of the Bush Administration's claim that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, the press, as a whole, did not challenge the administration's claims and widely reported the accusation. Only years later was it discovered that there never were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Kovach and Rosenstiel state that journalists simply spend less time fact checking and more time disseminating information, making the ways of skeptical knowing necessary (p. 45). Additional examples of poorly verified news stories are pulled from both liberal and conservative news outlets, allowing the reader to appreciate the way of skeptical knowing without questioning the authors' political motivations. Kovach and Rosenstiel provide a balanced look into the shortcomings of the four types of journalism and consequently demonstrate the need for the ways of skeptical knowing.

What is the Future of Journalism

Kovach and Rosenstiel are prudent to address the fact that journalism is not the only profession based in truth seeking. They name additional professions as those in the sciences, law, journalism, and law enforcement, but on no occasion do they name librarians in this realm of empiricism. As a professional librarian, I found this to be a significant oversight. In fact, the only mention of librarians occurs in the final chapter of the book when the authors describe key personnel in the modern newsroom, and in that case they cursorily rename librarians as information managers.

Blur ends with Kovach and Rosenstiel speculating about the future of journalism. They coin the term "next journalism" and use eight dimensions to describe the future functions of journalism as authenticator, sense maker, investigator, witness bearer, empowerer, smart aggregator, forum organizer, and role model. The web is the foundation of next journalism and the authors suggest next journalism will function through the creation of web-based "knowledge pages" (p. 193). Knowledge pages are described as "living encyclopedia entries, something richer and more dynamic even than a Wikipedia entry" (p. 193). The news organizations' vast knowledge and resources would be used to create

extensive text-based content on a topic. These pages would allow the public to review information needed to make an informed decision about the truth of any story. Journalists could then monetize knowledge pages through targeted consumer interest advertisements and create an economically sustainable business though, in my opinion, this business model might be difficult to pull off if the goal is unbiased, non-commercial content. The authors assert that journalists are equipped to create pages unlike anything else available on the web because of their ability to do extensive research and fact checking. The similarities between a knowledge page and LibGuides, utilized by so many libraries today, were obvious. LibGuides are typically filled with web links directing users to click URLs for additional resources. Alternatively, knowledge pages are much more than links, containing a great deal of text and media-rich content. Can librarians learn from the knowledge page model to create more informative and useful LibGuides? LibGuides could easily be transformed to include textual information about topics. The new text-filled LibGuides could orient undergraduate students to the disciplinary context of their topics, a concept most students struggle to grasp.

Informed Citizenry

The parallels between the authors' call for an informed citizenry and information literacy are striking. The six ways of skeptical knowing are essentially good questions for anyone to ask when they are evaluating sources of information. The questions are a roadmap to discovering bias, incomplete, or inaccurate information and can easily find a home adjacent to information literacy instruction. The book, or chapters from the book, are well suited for use in for-credit information literacy classes or as supplementary reading for students before a one-shot instruction session. Specifically, Librarians might find it helpful to have students read the pages where Kovach and Rosenstiel introduce the way of skeptical knowing and the four models of journalism (p. 26-31).

In the epilogue, Kovach and Rosenstiel make their boldest claims on the importance of the ways of skeptical knowing. Most poignantly, they state that the information gap of the twenty-first century will be "between people who have the skills to create knowledge and those who are simply in a process of affirming preconceptions without ever growing and learning. It is the new gap between reason and superstition" (p. 201). They continue by stating that civic literacy, and therefore their ideas on the ways of skeptical knowing, should be reintroduced into middle and high school curricula in order to better prepare students for college and beyond. Additionally, they claim without a civically literate citizenry, democracy may be at risk.

It is heartening that a field outside of librarianship is calling for education reform which includes teaching students how to critically evaluate sources of information. Other professionals now see the need for teaching information literacy. Unfortunately, the authors did not identify, at any point, that librarians were already doing this type of work, which speaks to the fact information literacy tends to be "owned" by librarians and much more could be done to reach outside our profession. At the close of the book, I had a new appreciation for the relevance of information literacy, a feeling of vindication, and a motivation to promote more outwardly the work of librarians in the field of information literacy. Librarians' ideas and voices need to be heard more loudly in a world that seems to be craving guidance through the information fog.

Apps for Tablets

It should be briefly noted that while the focus of this article is on using tools available directly via the web, be aware there are concept mapping apps available for tablet computer. Some of the tools mentioned in this article, such as MindMeister, have Android & iPad apps that allow a user to access their maps on the tablet, syncing and sharing information across devices. Search the App Store or Google Play Store to see if your concept map website also has an "app for that".

Wrap-Up

Although each has different strengths, all of the tools reviewed above are fairly easy and intuitive to use. For most students who possess basic information technology experience and/or skills, learning to use these tools will not present a significant challenge.

Concept mapping techniques can certainly be taught and undertaken without the use of online tools; however, we know that many of our students are preconditioned to prefer to work in this mode. You may find that for those students introducing them to concept mapping within the context of this type of technology may make them more receptive to the practice and willing to experiment with this method of exploring their research interests.

References

Novak, J. D. (2010). *Learning, creating, and using knowledge: Concept maps as facilitative tools in schools and corporations*. New York: Routledge.