

# Showcasing Knowledge

By Olivier Serrat

## The Great Information Glut

In the 21st century, the digital world provides a myriad means of communication. Distance, speed, and time no longer hold the importance they once did. Each day and night feed a growing flow.<sup>1</sup> Are today's (and tomorrow's) technologies leading to information overload<sup>2</sup> in a variety of formats? Information has become ubiquitous because producing, manipulating, and disseminating it is now cheap and easy.

But is more information necessarily good? A few responses follow. First, although we may be becoming better at capturing and storing information, there are processing limitations. (Observation suggests that "attention economy" emerges naturally from information overload.) Second, in reaction to the overabundance of views, we may avoid drawing conclusions. Third, with the increase in channels of information, people seem to have abandoned storytelling, that age-old technique that every society used to educate, entertain, and preserve culture; and to instill moral values. Fourth, without knowing the validity of content, we run the risk of misinformation. Fifth, are important discoveries, accomplishments, or initiatives being missed because vital papers are buried among others?

Denis Diderot (1713–1784), a French philosopher, art critic, and writer, mused about the information explosion in 1775.<sup>3</sup> Inevitably, the difficult concept of information overload will continuously rewrite its history. But some things will never change: in the 21st century, much as in the years that followed the invention of the mechanical printing

Information has become ubiquitous because producing, manipulating, and disseminating it is now cheap and easy.

But perceptions of information overload have less to do with quantity than with the qualities by which knowledge is presented.



<sup>1</sup> Electronic mail is a major source, as people struggle to keep up with the rate of incoming messages, including unsolicited commercial mail. Users must also contend with the growing use of e-mail attachments. (And it does take time to return to work after an e-mail interruption.) In addition, the internet provided access to billions of pages of information: search engines help find information quickly but users must often cross-check what they read before using it for decision making, which takes up more time. More recent, social media such as Facebook and Twitter has grown at an unbelievable rate. (At work, other channels of information include the telephone, of course, instant messaging, and Really Simple Syndication.)

<sup>2</sup> Forty years ago, Alvin Toffler conjectured that the human brain can only absorb and process so much information. Past that theoretical limit, it becomes overloaded: thinking and reasoning become dulled; decision making becomes flawed and, in some instances impossible. He suggested that this could lead to widespread physical and mental disturbances. See Alvin Toffler. 1970. *Future Shock*. Random House.

<sup>3</sup> Denis Diderot was a prominent figure of the Enlightenment. He is best known for serving as chief editor of and contributor of the *Encyclopédie*, which he helped create.

press,<sup>4</sup> exploring the critical distinction between information and knowledge remains the most important thing anyone must do.<sup>5</sup>

### Cutting “Info-Pollution”

Modern organizations are breeding grounds for information overload. (Sometimes, even trivial matters are packaged and marketed as important.) Long messages, especially in writing, overwhelm. Communicators of all

*As long as the centuries continue to unfold, the number of books will grow continually, and one can predict that a time will come when it will be almost as difficult to learn anything from books as from the direct study of the whole universe. It will be almost as convenient to search for some bit of truth concealed in nature as it will be to find it hidden away in an immense multitude of bound volumes.*

—Denis Diderot

types develop armor-piercing measures to attract attention (if not make a lasting impression).

Accountability for cutting “info-pollution” starts at the individual level. We can be smart agents and there are ways to manage our individual signal-to-noise ratios, for example, by not carbon-copying electronic mail to all. But, as primary sources of information smog, organizations should explore ways to contribute too.<sup>6</sup> They might formulate strategies to eliminate duplication or exchange of unnecessary information. (Some argue that the issue is not information overload but filter failure. Others see information overload as organization underload.) Technological solutions that organizations might introduce promise relief. For instance,

software can automatically sort and prioritize incoming electronic mail to regulate or divert the deluge. Importantly, nontechnological solutions may need to help people change the way they think and behave when communicating.

### Showcasing Knowledge

Then again, given our propensity for attention economy, is it possible that perceptions of information overload have less to do with the quantity of information in production or circulation at any time than with the qualities by which knowledge is presented? Might the biggest drain on our time simply be ineffective communication? For sure, there will always be demand for good knowledge products. Yet, paradoxically, authors often do not begin to understand how to disseminate these well.

Dissemination of knowledge is just as important as its production. High-performance organizations (i) adopt a strategic approach to dissemination; (ii) know their target audiences; (iii) formulate generic, viable dissemination strategies that can be amended to suit different purposes; (iv) hit the target; and (v) monitor and evaluate their accomplishments. Good marketing is essential to this and information sheets are a key element of effective outreach. In a crowded marketplace, a concise well-written summary and its calibrated dissemination will allow readers to easily gain information and understanding that is found more deeply in the document summarized. Knowledge that is available but not summarized might just as well be lost.

Each organization needs to come up with a solution that works within its own culture. These *Knowledge Solutions* advertise a series of one-pagers, the *Knowledge Showcase*,<sup>7</sup> that the Asian Development Bank introduced to record, store, and share cornerstone information about the success of specific tools, methods, and approaches to problems and challenges; cut “info-pollution”; and generate and share knowledge.

<sup>4</sup> Johann Gutenberg (c. 1398–1468), a German goldsmith and businessman, invented a mechanical printing press with movable type in 1436 (completed by 1440). This revolutionized the production of books and fostered rapid development in the sciences, arts, and religion through the transmission of texts.

<sup>5</sup> Data are discrete and objective facts, measurements, or observations that can be analyzed to generate information. Information is data that have been categorized, analyzed, summarized, and placed in context in a form that has structure and meaning. Knowledge is a combination of data and information, to which is added expert opinion, skills, and experience, resulting in a valuable asset that aids decision making.

<sup>6</sup> The Information Overload Research Group at [www.iorgforum.org/index.htm](http://www.iorgforum.org/index.htm) works to understand, publicize, and solve the information overload problem.

<sup>7</sup> ADB. 2008–. *Knowledge Showcase*. Manila. Available: [www.adb.org/documents/information/knowledge-showcase/default.asp](http://www.adb.org/documents/information/knowledge-showcase/default.asp)

**Box: Guidelines for Drafting Knowledge Showcases**

**Purpose.** The *Knowledge Showcase* series highlights innovative ideas from ADB technical assistance and other knowledge products. It seeks to foster discussion and research, perhaps even encourage replication. Rather than summaries of ADB (and other) reports, a *Knowledge Showcase* focuses on the crux of a discussion and refers readers to other sources, whenever possible, to deepen understanding.

*It is with words as with sunbeams. The more they are condensed, the deeper they burn.*  
—Robert Southey

**Audiences.** Target audiences include the governments of ADB's developing member countries; its Board of Directors, Management, senior staff, staff in headquarters, resident missions, and representative offices; knowledge management centers in developing member countries, such as universities and research institutes, local stakeholders, nongovernment organizations, and other development agencies.

Writers for the *Knowledge Showcase* should consider the following questions:

- Who are my readers? What unites them?
- Why should they care about what I am writing?
- What reaction am I looking to provoke in my readers?
- How might my readers change their behavior based on what I have written?

**Source Material.** *Knowledge Showcases* may be prepared for strategic knowledge products generated under technical assistance and nontechnical assistance—funded means, such as staff work and staff consultancies.

**Contents.** *Knowledge Showcases* present the “essence of the solution” to problems or challenges addressed by the technical assistance, project, or study. They emphasize tools, methods, and approaches used to resolve these. The topics may include the project design, assistance mode, consultation with stakeholders, reliance on indigenous skills, and other aspects that made the technical assistance, project, or study unique. Solutions to problems or challenges must be evident in the content.

*A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts.*  
—William Strunk

**Format.** The format of the outreach is readily available multimedia (online and hard copy). Soft copies will be available online on ADB’s website and departmental intranets. Hard copies can be made available to target audiences as needed.

**Title.** Contributors should select succinct, catchy titles that attract readers’ attention without revealing too much of the main message. The shorter the title, the better.

**Text.** The main text should be 500–800 words couched in two columns over two pages. Graphs, tables, or photographs should be included. A graphic should occupy not more than 20 lines of one column. The one-pager will also contain standard language about ADB, the purpose of the *Knowledge Showcase* series, the author, contact information, and links to cited materials on ADB’s website.

**Structure.** The main text should be structured as follows:

- Main points—up to four bullet points that summarize key messages;
- Introduction or background—a paragraph or two describing the basis, rationale, stakeholders, and beneficiaries of the technical assistance, project, or study;
- Problems or challenges—a discussion of the obstacles experienced by the stakeholders and/or project implementers, which may include feelings associated with these obstacles;
- Analysis—arguments and/or key findings that discuss the actions taken; the time and place markers related to the actions taken; the main turning points, outcomes, and impacts as supported by facts, figures, images, and vivid language; and
- Conclusions or recommendations—a summary of how things turned out; the endings; the learning that



outcomes and impacts presented; and/or recommendations for replication of the tools, methods, and approaches used to resolve the problems or challenges.

Beginning the text with bullets on main points (matched to color-coded sentences in the main text) helps the reader navigate from principal arguments to details. The first sentence of key paragraphs is in bold (color-coded to the bullet points at the top). A note at the end of the first page refers readers to the Uniform Resource Locator (web link) of the source document, where available, and the e-mail address of the author of the *Knowledge Showcase*. Technical notes for information that cannot be accommodated on the first page can be included on the second page. Standard information about ADB is presented at the bottom of the second page.

**Style.** Writers should (i) start and finish strong, i.e., attract and maintain the attention of readers and generate interest in the knowledge product associated with the *Knowledge Showcase*; (ii) keep sentences short; (iii) avoid unnecessary words; (iv) select active verbs; and (v) use concrete language. The use of hyperlinks, which can connect documents (or elements thereof) to others, is recommended. Hyperlinks are an essential ingredient of all hypertext systems, including the internet.

**References.** The *Knowledge Showcase* can include bibliographic references, for which URLs should be provided.

**Approval.** In consultation with the office or department's Knowledge Management Unit (or designated equivalent), the proponent should submit the draft *Knowledge Showcase* to his/her supervisor for approval following intradepartmental and, as necessary, interdepartmental peer review with other relevant knowledge departments, such as the Asian Development Bank Institute, the Economics and Research Department, the Office of Regional Economic Integration, and the Regional and Sustainable Development Department. Following approval, the draft and associated metadata should be submitted to the Regional and Sustainable Development Department (focal point Olivier Serrat) for review. The Department of External Relations will copyedit and lay out the draft and return it to the author for final approval.

**Dissemination.** ADB's website and *ADB Today* are primary dissemination tools. An external *Knowledge Showcases* blogsite is at <http://knowledgeshowcase.blogspot.com/>. Printed copies can be circulated to the targeted audiences on a selective basis.

### Further Reading

- ADB. 2006-. *Evaluation News*. Manila. Available: [www.adb.org/evaluation/reports.asp?s=1&type=20](http://www.adb.org/evaluation/reports.asp?s=1&type=20)
- . 2007-. *Learning Curves*. Manila. Available: [www.adb.org/evaluation/reports.asp?s=1&type=15](http://www.adb.org/evaluation/reports.asp?s=1&type=15)
- . 2008-. *Knowledge Showcase*. Manila. Available: [www.adb.org/documents/information/knowledge-showcase/default.asp](http://www.adb.org/documents/information/knowledge-showcase/default.asp)
- . 2008. *Storytelling*. Manila. Available: [www.adb.org/documents/information/knowledge-solutions/storytelling.pdf](http://www.adb.org/documents/information/knowledge-solutions/storytelling.pdf)
- . 2009. *Disseminating Knowledge Products*. Manila. Available: [www.adb.org/documents/information/knowledge-solutions/disseminating-knowledge-products.pdf](http://www.adb.org/documents/information/knowledge-solutions/disseminating-knowledge-products.pdf)

### For further information

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Asian Development Bank

ADB's vision is an Asia and Pacific region free of poverty. Its mission is to help its developing member countries reduce poverty and improve the quality of life of their people. Despite the region's many successes, it remains home to two thirds of the world's poor: 1.8 billion people who live on less than \$2 a day, with 903 million struggling on less than \$1.25 a day. ADB is committed to reducing poverty through inclusive economic growth, environmentally sustainable growth, and regional integration.

Based in Manila, ADB is owned by 67 members, including 48 from the region. Its main instruments for helping its developing member countries are policy dialogue, loans, equity investments, guarantees, grants, and technical assistance.

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Knowledge Solutions are handy, quick reference guides to tools, methods, and approaches that propel development forward and enhance its effects. They are offered as resources to ADB staff. They may also appeal to the development community and people having interest in knowledge and learning.

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