

Smart news consumers need a balanced information diet

By Eric M. Stahl

These are challenging times for the news business. But for news consumers, it's a golden age.

Readers have access to more information, more rapidly, than at any time in history. Want to know the latest from the Middle East? Check your local newspaper — or Al Jazeera, The Jerusalem Post or your favorite blog. The choices are practically endless.

And information doesn't just flow one way. It used to be, as A.J. Liebling put it, that "freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one." That's no longer true.

Seahawks fan David Hsu was on a recent flight from San Francisco to Miami when he noticed 49ers quarterback Alex Smith on the plane. Hsu tweeted about it — raising the possibility that Smith, a free agent, might be signing with the Dolphins. It was big news for football fans, first revealed on Twitter. When the plane landed in Florida, a reporter and photographer from the local newspaper were waiting.

Today, anyone with an Internet connection can be a publisher and a source of news for others.

That's mostly a good thing. But not every source is credible. The instantaneous access to news 24/7 makes us better informed, but also leaves us more susceptible to falsehoods and distortions.

That's why it's more important than ever to pay attention to your "media diet." Here are some tips to help you avoid the junk and find a healthy mix of news and ideas.

- **Don't believe everything you read**
It's remarkable how much credence people will give to something just because it's in print or posted on a well-designed

website. Have you heard about the Pacific Northwest tree octopus? When shown a website about this supposedly endangered (and entirely fictitious) species, 24 out of 25 middle-school students in one study were unable to recognize the site as a hoax.

Just because news looks and sounds authentic doesn't necessarily make it so. A healthy amount of skepticism never hurts.

- **Consider the source**
How do you know whether your media sources are reliable? Start with the obvious: Look for sources that have a record of providing accurate, credible information. Consider whether the reporters "show their work" by identifying where the information originated and providing links to the primary material.

Look critically at who is quoted. Are the sources knowledgeable, or is most of the information coming from someone with an ax to grind? Does the story offer a variety of perspectives?

Mainstream news organizations traditionally have played the role of gatekeeper — vetting facts and applying journalistic standards before information is published. Most still do so, despite competitive pressure to get the news out nearly as it happens.

Still, no source is infallible. Another sign of journalistic integrity is how the organization reacts when a mistake occurs. As the recent Mike Daisey episode on "This American Life" showed, even trusted sources of information can fall short sometimes. In that instance, one of the most popular programs on public radio

unknowingly passed off fiction for fact — and it later retracted the entire episode.

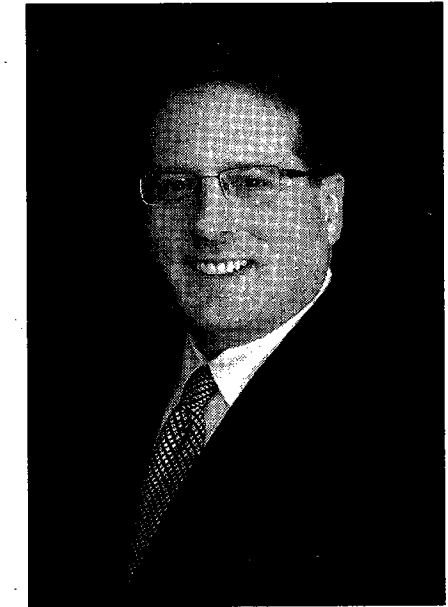
- **Better yet, consider many sources**
The best strategy for media consumption is the same one nutritionists recommend for food: Enjoy a varied and balanced diet. It's just not healthy to get all your information from one source, even if it's usually a good one.

So expand your palate. Even mainstream news outlets have their particular outlook. Don't just settle for one. The same event may look different when covered by your hometown newspaper, a national cable station and an overseas website. Sample the entire media buffet.

The same goes for opinion journalism. Seek out perspectives different from your own, and beware of any source that claims to have all the answers. Informed commentary doesn't always come from the loudest voices, and doesn't always see things in black and white. If someone is telling you to ignore other points of view — whether they come from the left or the right — change the channel.

- **Consider your own role in the conversation**
We are all publishers now. Have something to say about a news story online? The comment section awaits you. Want to share a story or a viral video with your friends? Anyone can do so on Twitter or Facebook.

Remember, though, that being a publisher means taking responsibility for the information you disseminate. Don't post information that you know is inaccurate, hurtful or unfair. And think before you click "send." You are writing in ink.



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