UNIT I - Information

Introduction

We live in the information age. Learning how to critically analyse the barrage of information that is available to us is an important skill to develop. This is because information is a vital resource for decision making. Decisions based on wrong or incomplete information can be disastrous. This means that you need to not only be able to find the information you need but be able to assess whether that information is useful and appropriate. In other words, you need to be information competent.

In order to consider yourself information competent, you need to be able to do the following using both print and digital media:

- Find the relevant information you need from different sources
- Evaluate the information you have acquired
- Organise and maintain the information you have chosen to use
- Attribute the information used correctly to avoid plagiarism
- Interpret and use the information in written or oral form

This course teaches you the skills you need to be able to perform the above-mentioned skills effectively.

In this unit, we will start by learning the definitions and difference between data and information and distinguish between the different types of information available.

Objectives

Upon completion of this unit you will be able to:

- define the terms data and information
- explain the difference between data and information;
- describe the difference between primary, secondary and tertiary information;
- evaluate any piece of information whether it is primary, secondary, or tertiary in nature

1. Data and Information

Data is unstructured facts and figures. They are not organised in any way. For instance, the price charged for an item at a supermarket – a till slip. Thousands of these till slips will be produced every day – a mass of data.

Suppose these till slips could be collected and sorted by product and date: we might get an indication of the most popular products at the supermarket, and the price variation or rate of inflation, for various foodstuffs. This is information.

For data to become information, it must be contextualised, categorised, calculated and condensed (Davenport & Prusak, 2000).
“N$1” is data. Without a context, it could be the price of anything or the denomination of a particular coin. If I say “This is a N$1 coin” then you have information. In other words, information is interpreted data. In order to interpret data, you need a context.

This is a very important distinction. Information is relevant and comprehensible, the tool that supports you in making a decision.

Video
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4xWwEttrzo8

Activity 1
Watch the following video:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJkB_ITY1pE

Think of two examples of data and information with reasons as to why you categorise them as such.

2. Sources of Information

Sources of information
Now that you have an understanding of the difference between data and information, let’s now turn our attention to the different sources of information.

When you search for information, you will find out they come from three sources namely primary, secondary and tertiary. We will look at each one. The distinction of each source hinges on how far from the original event is the information created from.

Primary information
Primary information is a direct account of events, from the viewpoint of its actors or witnesses of the event. It is a direct interpretation of data related to the event.

Examples of primary information are diaries or journals, minutes of meetings, eye witness reports, interviews and scientific data analysis.

Secondary information
Secondary information created by someone who did not have first-hand experience or did not participate in the event that happened. It is an interpretation and creation from primary information sources.

That means that the data that forms the basis of secondary information is not the same as the data for primary information. The subject of the interpretation is not the data itself, but its primary interpretation!

If you provide a written account of an accident you were in, then the report you wrote is considered a primary source of information. If a journalist used your accident report for a newspaper article then the newspaper article is considered a secondary source of information.

Other examples of secondary information are academic research output, TV documentaries and the like. Most information available to us via the mass media is secondary.
Tertiary information is a collection of and extraction from both primary and secondary sources of information. It consists of summaries of many events and very general descriptions of topics discussed.

Examples of tertiary information are text books, dictionaries, encyclopaedias, annual reports and executive summaries.

Like with secondary information, the basis of its data is itself information: Assertions like “Namibia has a very high accident rate” are, if properly generated, reflections on the general number of reported accidents compared to those from other countries. Most details are being left out – abstracted from – to achieve a general, high-level analysis.

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<tr>
<th>Examples of different sources of information</th>
<th>Sources of information</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Primary Information</strong></td>
<td>You witnessed a car accident in the street and file a Police report on it. The original diaries and letters of Nelson Mandela</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Secondary Information</strong></td>
<td>You read a newspaper report about a car accident in the street. A biography of Nelson Mandela, reviewing his thoughts as expressed in diaries and letters, written maybe by someone who met or knows him</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Tertiary Information</strong></td>
<td>The accident was included in the statistics published by the Traffic Department each month. An encyclopaedia article about Nelson Mandela, written by someone who is knowledgeable but who has never met him</td>
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Video: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZq91ER770g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZq91ER770g)

Activity 2: For each of the following situations, indicate whether you would use a primary, secondary or tertiary source of information. Explain the reason for your choice and where you would find this information.

1. You want to know about the liberation struggle during your grandmother’s time. She lives in a village in Namibia.
2. You want to know about the possible treatment options for cancer.
3. You need to write a report on “passion killings in Namibia” and what can be done to prevent it.
4. You want to find out “how to bake a cake”.
5. You want to find out the meaning of the word “synchronous”.

Activity 3: Watch the following video: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dv3D8q4LZbM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dv3D8q4LZbM)

In your field of study (Accounting, Marketing etc) explain what would be considered a primary, secondary and tertiary source of information.
Keywords/concepts

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<th>Data:</th>
<th>Unstructured facts and figures.</th>
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<td><strong>Information:</strong></td>
<td>Data that has been collected, contextualised and interpreted as a tool for decision-making.</td>
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<td><strong>Primary information source:</strong></td>
<td>This is a record of event as it actually happened. For example an eye witness account of an accident.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Secondary information source:</strong></td>
<td>An interpretation or report of an event recorded in a primary source. For example news report of an accident.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Tertiary information source:</strong></td>
<td>A compilation of information from primary and secondary sources. For example statistics of all the accidents that happened in Namibia from 1990-2017</td>
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Summary

In this unit, you learned that an information competent person must be able to find the needed information, evaluate the usability and credibility of the information for the said purpose, organise and maintain the information, use the information with correct attribution to present and share it.

The difference between data and information was also discussed. Data is defined as unstructured facts and figures whereas information is data that has been collected, contextualised and interpreted as a decision making tool.

You also learned that there are three main sources of information namely primary, secondary and tertiary information. Primary information sources are first-hand source of information e.g. eye witness accounts. Secondary information sources are gleaned and reported from primary sources e.g. news reports. Tertiary information sources are a compilation of primary and secondary sources e.g. Encyclopedia.

In the next unit, we will discuss tools that can be used to search for information.