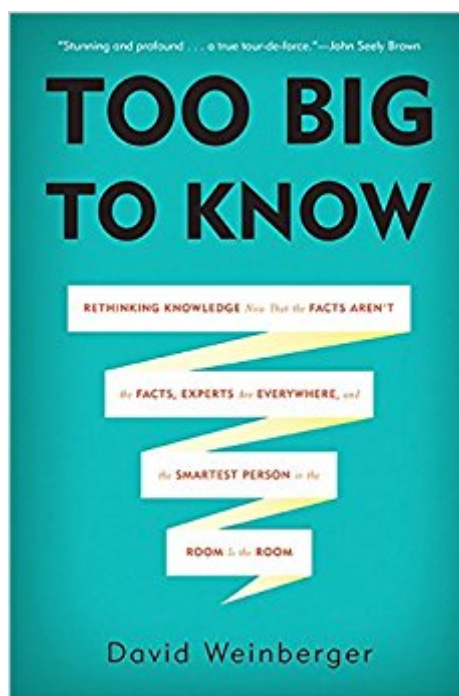




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# Too Big To Know: Rethinking Knowledge Now That The Facts Aren't The Facts, Experts Are Everywhere, And The Smartest Person In The Room Is The Room



## Synopsis

With the advent of the Internet and the limitless information it contains, we're less sure about what we know, who knows what, or even what it means to know at all. And yet, human knowledge has recently grown in previously unimaginable ways and in inconceivable directions. In *Too Big to Know*, David Weinberger explains that, rather than a systemic collapse, the Internet era represents a fundamental change in the methods we have for understanding the world around us. With examples from history, politics, business, philosophy, and science, *Too Big to Know* describes how the very foundations of knowledge have been overturned, and what this revolution means for our future.

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Marc Benioff, chairman, CEO salesforce.com, bestselling author of *Behind the Clouds*; Led by the Internet, knowledge is now social, mobile, and open. Weinberger shows how to unlock the benefits. • John Seely Brown, co-author of *The Social Life of Information* and *A New Culture of Learning*; *Too Big to Know* is a stunning and profound book on how our concept of knowledge is changing in the age of the Net. It honors the traditional social practices of knowing, where genres stay fixed, and provides a graceful way of understanding new strategies for knowing in today's rapidly evolving, networked world. I couldn't put this book down. It is a true tour-de-force written in a delightful way. • Daniel H. Pink, author of *Drive* and *A Whole New Mind*; With this insightful book, David Weinberger cements his status as one of the most important thinkers of the

digital age. If you want to understand what it means to live in a world awash in information, *Too Big to Know* is the guide you've been looking for. • Tony Burgess, Cofounder, CompanyCommand.com • David Weinberger's *Too Big to Know* is an inspiring read; especially for networked leaders who already believe that the knowledge to change the world is living and active, personal, and vastly interconnected. • If, as David writes, 'Knowledge is becoming inextricable from; literally unthinkable without; the network that enables it' our great task as leaders is to design networks for the greater good. • David casts the vision and gives us excellent examples of what that looks like in action, even as he warns us of the pitfalls that await us. •

David Weinberger is a Senior Researcher at Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet & Society. He is the author of *Small Pieces Loosely Joined*, *Everything Is Miscellaneous*, and a coauthor of *The Cluetrain Manifesto*. He lives in Brookline, Massachusetts.

How do you know what you think you know? What counts as knowledge and what doesn't? These questions speak to a great semantics-based problem, i.e., trying to define what knowledge is. Studying the nature of knowledge falls within the domain of a branch of philosophy called epistemology, which happens largely to be the subject matter of David Weinberger's book *Too Big to Know*. According to Weinberger, most of us tend to think that there are certain individuals "called experts" who are knowledgeable about a certain topic and actually possess knowledge of it. Their knowledge and expertise is thought to be derived from their ability to correctly interpret facts, often through some theoretical lens. Today, like facts, experts too have become ubiquitous. It seems we are actually drowning in a world with too many experts and too many facts, or at least an inability to pick out the true experts and the important facts. Most of us are appalled, for instance, when we hear the facts about how many people are living in poverty in the United States. However, these facts can be misleading and most people don't have enough time to think critically about the facts that are hurled at them every day. There might in fact be a large amount of people living in poverty in the United States, but did you know that someone with a net-worth north of one million dollars can technically be living in poverty? How the government defines poverty is very different than the connotation that many of us have of that word. The amount of income you have is the sole factor used to determine if one is living in poverty, but this bit of information seldom accompanies the facts about how many people are living in poverty. I recently posed a question on

Facebook asking my subscribers if a fact could be false. To my surprise, there was much disagreement over this seemingly simple question. Weinberger reminds us that facts were once thought to be the antidote to disagreement, but it seems that the more facts are available to us, the more disagreements we seem to have, even if they are meta-factual. It's unquestionable that today's digitally literate class of people have more facts at their fingertips than they know what to do with. Is this, however, leading us any closer to Truth? Well, not necessarily. This is because not all facts are created equal, and not all facts are necessarily true. Facts are statements about objective reality that we believe are true. However, while a fact can be false, truth is such regardless of our interpretation of it. We can know facts, but we can't necessarily know Truth. In the book, Weinberger draws an important distinction between classic facts and networked facts. The late U.S. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan famously said: "Everyone is entitled to his own opinions, but not to his own facts." What he meant by that was that facts (what Weinberger calls classic facts) were thought to give us a way of settling our disagreements. Networked facts, however, open up into a network of disagreement depending on the context in which they are interpreted. "We have more facts than ever before," writes Weinberger, "so we can see more convincingly than ever before that facts are not doing the job we hired them for." This seems to be true even amongst people who use a similar framework and methodology for arriving at their beliefs (e.g., scientists). One of Weinberger's central arguments is that the Digital Revolution has allowed us to create a new understanding of what knowledge is and where it resides. Essentially, he claims that the age of experts is over, the facts are no longer the facts (in the classical sense), and knowledge actually resides in our networks. While this is an interesting idea, I'm not sure it's entirely true. Knowledge is a strange thing since it depends on the human mind in order to exist. I have a stack of books sitting on my desk, but I don't point to them and say there is a stack of knowledge sitting on my desk. I simply don't yet know if there is any knowledge to be gleaned from those books. For this reason, I don't think knowledge can exist on networks either. Knowledge requires human cognition in order to exist, which means that it only exists in experience, thus giving it this strange ephemeral characteristic. I cannot unload my knowledge and store it anywhere, then retrieve it at a later date. It simply ceases to exist outside of my ability to cognize it. Knowledge, Weinberger argues, exists in the networks we create, free of cultural and theoretical interpretations. It seems that he is expanding on an idea from Marshall McLuhan, who famously said, "The medium is the message." Is it possible, then, that knowledge is the medium? The way I interpret his argument, Weinberger seems to be claiming that the medium also shapes what counts as

knowledge. Or, as he himself puts it, "transform the medium by which we develop, preserve, and communicate knowledge, and we transform knowledge." This definition of knowledge is, however, problematic if one agrees that knowledge can only exist in the mind of a human (or comparable) being. To imply that a unified body of knowledge exists "out there" in some objective way and that human cognition isn't necessary for it to exist undermines any value the term has historically had. Ultimately, I don't agree with Weinberger's McLuhanesque interpretation that knowledge has this protean characteristic. In a recent essay in The Atlantic Nicholas Carr posed the question: "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" His inquiry spawned a flurry of questions pertaining to our intelligence and the Net. Although Weinberger has high hopes for what the Net can do for us, he isn't necessarily overly optimistic either. In fact, he claims that it's "incontestable that this is a great time to be stupid" too. The debate over whether the Internet makes us smarter or dumber seems silly to me, though. I cannot help but conclude that it makes some people smarter and some people dumber "it all depends on how it is used. Most of us (myself included) naturally like to conjugate in our digital echo chambers and rant about things we think we know (I suspect this is why my provocative "Who Wants to Maintain Clocks?" essay stirred up some controversy "most RS readers don't usually hear these things in their echo chambers). Weinberger also argues that having too much information isn't a problem, but actually a good thing. Again, I disagree. In support of this claim, he piggybacks off of Clay Shirky, who tells us that the ills of information overload are simply filtering problems. I, however, don't see filtering as a panacea because filtering still requires the valuable commodity of time. At some point, we have to spend more time filtering than we do learning. An aphorism by Nassim Taleb comes to mind: "To bankrupt a fool, give him information." Overall, Weinberger does a nice job of discussing the nature of knowledge in the Digital Age, even though I disagree with one of his main points that knowledge exists in a new networked milieu. The book is excellent in the sense that it encourages us to think deeply about the messy nature of epistemology "yes, that's an opinion and not a fact!

This book is a meditation on how the Internet and its relatives have affected meaning and use of knowledge in the 21st Century. It really provides an epistemology for what is called the Information Age. Weinberger explores such concepts as "crowd sourcing" "collective intelligence" and the effect of open Internet access on public understanding and evaluation of issues affecting them. This book is filled with original and for the most part valid insights on how the Internet ET all has shaped and

changed not only how knowledge is used, but how it is perceived. I will provide one example of how Weinberger has gone about making his argument: In 1967 twelve academic philosophers formed the "Heidegger Circle" as a closed study group for the German 20th Century philosopher Martin Heidegger. This group had all the advantages of a closed circle: productive work could be done using basic commonly agreed to assumptions, with information exchanged quite probably accurate and ideas advanced well considered. The members were experts on Heidegger. Yet the fact that it was a closed circle insulated them from criticism outside the circle and outsider information that could have helped them to develop and clarify their thinking on a notoriously difficult writer. Well with the Internet the circle became a 4,000 member group that included people who did not really know what they were talking about and could "grind important topics down to dust." Yet the larger group also collectively knew more than the closed circle, challenged older and often incorrect assumptions, and developed new areas of study of this philosopher. So is this book worth reading? Well it depends on whether or not you want to know what knowledge has become in the age of the Internet and the theories that Weinberger contends explain the transformation of knowledge into a network based phenomenon. The book is an insightful piece of work that will profoundly influence such esoteric subjects as systems thinking and knowledge management.

I admit it: I generally don't like books about knowledge. As an every-day-in-the-trenches knowledge practitioner, I generally find them either hopelessly academic or breathtakingly obvious. So I was gobsmacked by this book, both deftly written and profound. It would have been excellent entertainment, except for the fact that it upended a lifetime's worth of assumptions about knowledge, and especially authoritative knowledge. The book's premise is that the way we have approached knowledge is an unhelpful hangover from a world of scarcity. The filtering mechanisms we use to whittle the world's information down to the very most authoritative knowledge have far more to do with the limited supply of paper and shelf space than the way that knowledge works in the real world. Cluetrain Manifesto co-author Weinberger argues that accepting the inevitability of information overload, and developing mechanisms to filter forward the most relevant, is the only productive way of engaging with the world. In a Too Big to Know world, curation is replaced by an unbounded network of links: links from assertions to the facts that support them to the sources for those facts. And also, links to the assertions' counterarguments and their networks of facts. He explores the implications of abundant knowledge in many disciplines: policymaking, science, books, and leadership, to name a few. As a Knowledge-Centered Support (KCS) advocate, the idea of moving from scarcity to abundance, and from authority to relevance, is satisfying and nearly

self-evident...in knowledge bases. And "the world's knowledge is doubling every X years" is a familiar theme. Still, applying these same big ideas to the wider world is unsettling. I'm looking forward to reading this again next year after a little soak time.

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