



Information Overload, Concept of

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GLOSSARY

cultural ADD The recently observed social variant of Attention Deficit Disorder. The classic form of ADD is thought to be a biologically based condition causing a persistent pattern of difficulties resulting in inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity. Cultural ADD attributes the same set of behaviors to the overwhelming speed of information and our increasing culture of distraction.

data smog An unexpected and unwelcome new component to the age of information, data smog is an expression for the overwhelming volume of e-mail, voice mail, faxes, junk mail, up-to-the-minute news flashes, and mesmerizing electronic images that we now come into contact with regularly.

meta-analysis The study of studies; a method of combining pools of statistics from a wide range of studies and making a comprehensive analysis based on the whole.

spam Unsolicited e-mail; the term is derived from a comedy skit by the absurdist troupe Monty Python in which unsuspecting diners are informed that the restaurant menu includes “egg and bacon, egg sausage and bacon, egg and Spam, egg bacon and Spam, egg bacon sausage and Spam, Spam bacon sausage and Spam, Spam egg Spam Spam bacon and Spam” [and so on]. When, in the early 1990s, it was noticed that certain individuals got a kick out of interrupting text-based Net dialogues with useless and irrelevant drivel, the term “spam” seemed apt.

stat wars Michael Kinsley’s term for the exhaustive, constant policy arguments fueled by seemingly unlimited amounts of data. Factionalism gets a big boost from the volleys of data, while dialogue and consensus—the marrow of democracy—run thinner and thinner every year.

Just as fat has replaced starvation as the number one dietary concern of the United States, information overload has replaced information scarcity as an important new emotional, social, and political problem.

We have quite suddenly mutated into a radically different culture, a civilization that trades in and survives on stylized communication. And as we enjoy the many fruits of this burgeoning information civilization, we also have to learn to compensate for the new and permanent side effects of what sociologists, in an academic understatement, call a “message dense” society.

If scientific discovery has not been an unalloyed blessing, if it has conferred on mankind the power not only to create but also to annihilate, it has at the same time provided humanity with a supreme challenge and a supreme testing.

—John F. Kennedy, 1963

I. THE SURPRISING TRADEOFFS OF INFORMATION PROLIFERATION

Something marvelous has been happening to humankind—not just in the past three or four years with computers and the Internet, but more broadly in the past several decades. Information is moving faster and becoming more plentiful, and people everywhere are benefiting from this change.

But there is a surprising postscript to this story. When it comes to information, it turns out that one can have too much of a good thing. At a certain level of input, the law of diminishing returns takes effect; the glut of information no longer adds to our quality of life, but instead begins to cultivate stress, confusion, and even ignorance. Information overload threatens our ability to educate ourselves and leaves us more vulnerable as consumers and less cohesive as a society. For most of us, it actually diminishes our control over our own lives, while those already in power find their positions considerably strengthened.

This is not the first time we have been confronted by the unpleasant side effects of abundance. Those of us who live in the United States, the most sophisticated and successful nation on Earth, also routinely find ourselves burdened by problems of excess. Now, for all the