

DATA SMOG

Surviving the Info Glut

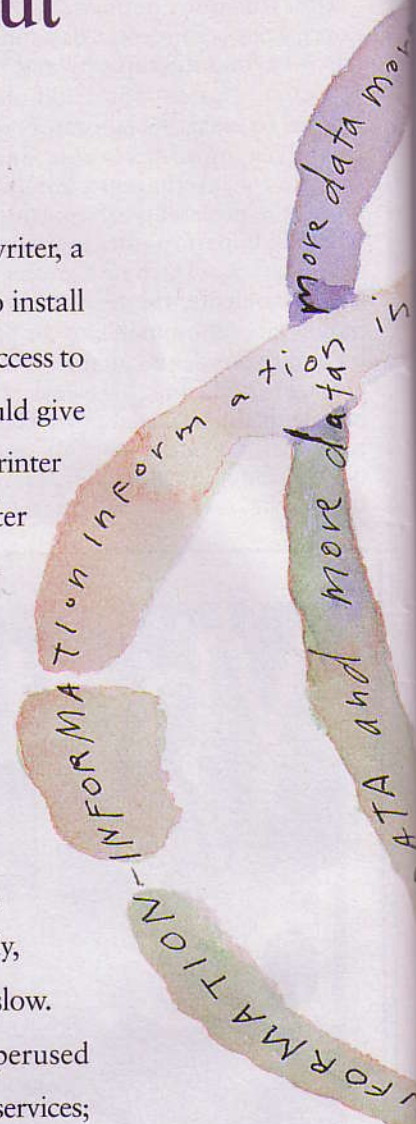
BY DAVID SHENK

DURING the infancy of my career as a freelance writer, a man came to my home in Washington, D.C., to install a prolific new appliance. The machine gave me access to the Federal News Service, which I felt sure would give me a leg up. Every day, morning, noon, and night, the printer spat out interviews from talk shows only moments after

they had been broadcast, major speeches from senators, ambassadors, and other Washington heavies, and absolutely every utterance from the White House. Without ever leaving my home office, I felt plugged in.

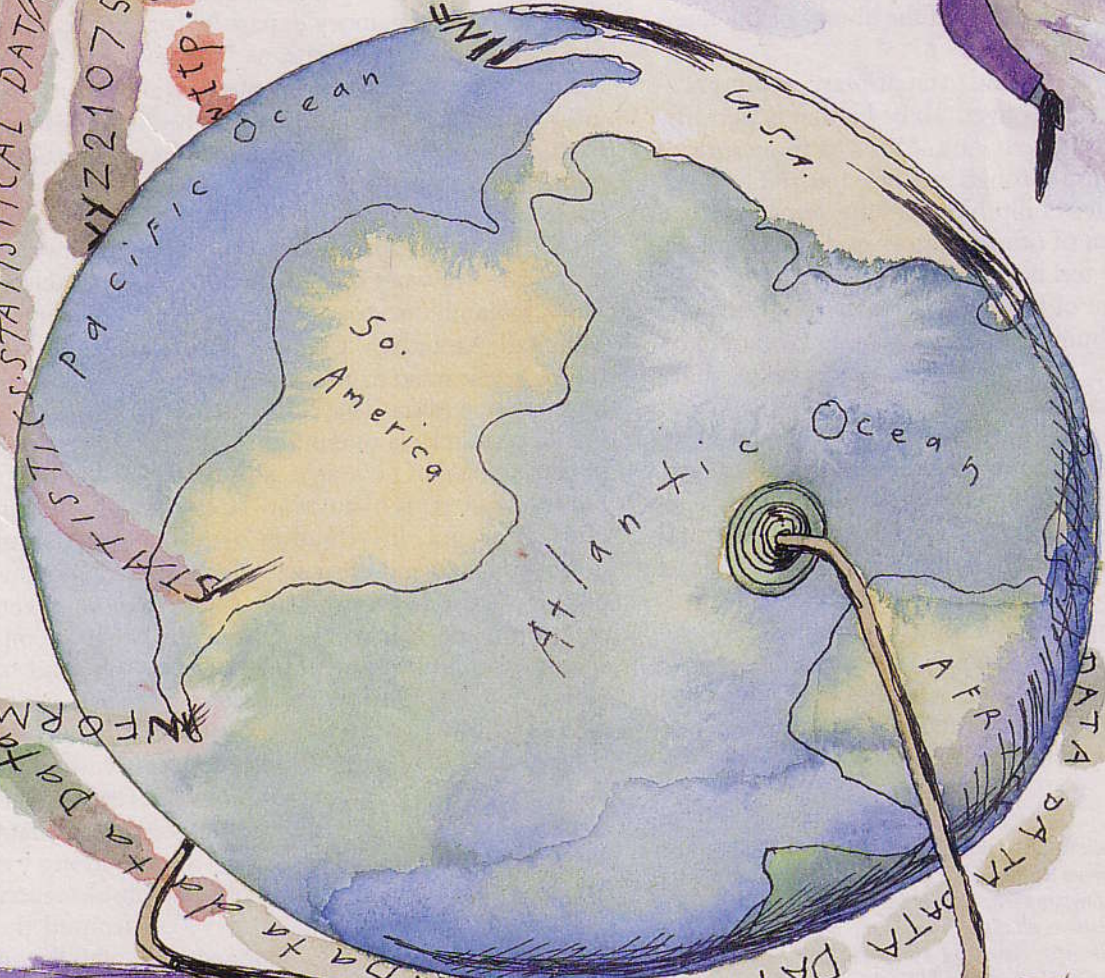
The installation resulted from my decision to confront the rushing tide head on, to try to keep pace with the new and speedy, and to more or less disregard the old and slow. As part of this approach I doggedly perused numerous newspapers, magazines, and wire services; I continually checked my e-mail; I watched Cable News Network; I stopped spending time with books and other cumbersome material that felt more like yesterday.

The ability to churn out ever greater volumes of information in a variety of formats has exceeded our ability to process it. Fortunately, firm action, both personal and political, can help clear the air.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY BLAIR THORNLEY

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But I soon found that my reliable Federal News Service printer expected me to be its equal. It could print two pages a minute—why couldn't I read two pages a minute? The printer had just spewed out a dozen transcripts. Was I still working on that same paragraph?

Somewhere along the line, the empowering eagle became an albatross. In a month or so, I pulled the plug. The nice man came back and carted the machine away. I locked the gate behind him.

Some years later, in a classroom at Columbia University, I attended a guest lecture given by Brian Lamb, sometime anchor of the two C-SPAN channels, which broadcast congressional debates and other government proceedings. For an hour or so, Lamb spoke confidently about the history of C-SPAN and why he believed it to be a vital public service. He boasted of his plans to introduce the new cable channels C-SPAN3, C-SPAN4, and C-SPAN5. But then his host, Columbia economics professor and communications specialist Eli Noam, asked Lamb two simple questions: "Is more information necessarily good? Does it really improve the political process?"

"I haven't got a clue as to whether it's good or bad," Lamb replied. "But you can't stop this process. It's the American way. Which part of the library or the Internet do you want to shut down?"

At home, at work, and even at play, communication has engulfed our lives. To be human is to traffic in enormous chunks of data. "Tens of thousands of words daily pulse through our beleaguered brains," says philosopher Philip Novak, "accompanied by a massive amount of other auditory and visual stimuli. No wonder we feel burnt."

If the concept of too much information seems odd and vaguely inhuman, that's because, in evolutionary-historical terms, it is. For 100,000 years people have been able to examine and consider information about as quickly as they have been able to create and circulate it. A range of communication technologies from the drum and smoke signal to the telegraph and telephone enabled us to develop and sustain culture and overcome our fear of others, diminishing the likelihood of conflict. But in the middle of this century the introduction of computers, microwave transmissions, television, and satellites abruptly knocked this graceful synchrony off track. These hyper-production and hyper-distribution mechanisms have surged ahead and left us with a permanent processing deficit—what

Finnish sociologist Jaako Lehtonen calls an "information discrepancy."

In 1850, 4 percent of American workers handled information for a living; now most do, and information processing, as opposed to manufacturing material goods, now accounts for more than half the U.S. gross national product. Information has become so ubiquitous partly because producing, manipulating, and disseminating information has become cheap and easy; with a thumb and index finger, we effortlessly copy and paste sentences, paragraphs, books, and "carbon copy" e-mail to one or one hundred others.

We crave and pay handsomely for some of the information we receive—the seductive, mesmerizing quick-cut television ads and the 24-hour up-to-the-minute news flashes. It arrives in the form of the faxes we request as well as the ones we don't; we pursue it through the Web sites we eagerly visit before and after dinner, the pile of magazines we pour through every month, and the dozens of channels we flip through whenever we have a free moment.

What is the harm of this incessant barrage of stimuli captivating our senses at virtually every waking moment? "We're exceptional at storing information," explains UCLA memory expert Robert Bjork. "But there are retrieval limitations." Memory is stored according to specific cues—contexts within which the information is experienced. When the contexts begin to vanish in a sea of data, it becomes more difficult to remember any single piece of it. The more we know, the less we know.

"We're pushing ourselves to speeds beyond which it appears we were designed to live," says Nelson Thall, research director at the University of Toronto's Marshall McLuhan Center. "Electric technology speeds up the mind to an extraordinary degree, but the body stays in place. This gap causes a lot of stress."

At a certain level of input the glut becomes a cloud of data smog that no longer adds to our quality of life but instead begins to cultivate stress, confusion, and even ignorance. Information overload crowds out quiet moments and obstructs much-needed contemplation. It spoils conversation, literature, and even entertainment. It leaves us more vulnerable as consumers and less cohesive as a society. "We tend to make very unsophisticated inferences when we're under cognitive load," says University of Texas psychologist Dan Gilbert. "Thinking deeply cannot be done." Since today's glutted environment renders consumers distracted and easily open to suggestion, data smog may just be the best thing to come along for hyperinformed marketers since planned obsolescence.

This isn't the first time we have confronted the unpleasant side effects of abundance. We who live in the most sophisticated and successful nation on earth

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