Information Overload in the Age of Coronavirus

Ido Aharoni   Follow

Apr 1 · 5 min read ★

The global crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic has

brought to light a number of great human qualities such as mutual responsibility, caring and compassionate giving. But it has also exposed many systemic weaknesses and deficiencies. One of them is the profound social and economic impact of information overload.

A key feature of today's technological revolution is the unprecedented volume of information created by humanity. Technology allows participants to access information in an unprecedented fashion, with remarkable speed and accuracy. This massive exposure has led to the creation of the increasingly dominant Information Overload.

The term was coined in 1964 by political scientist **Bertram Gross** of New York's Hunter College — but was popularized by **Heidi and Alvin Toffler** who referred to it in their book "Future Shock" (1970). In psychology and neurology, the concept of 'sensory overload', 'emotional overload' and 'data overload' have been studied for much longer. Historians note that 'information overload' became an issue even during the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution. Most researchers define 'information overload' as a phenomenon which "impairs the understanding of complex issues and effectively harms decision making due to too much information about the issue at hand."

The Human brain is designed to handle a certain level of stimulation which is needed for survival. This is the main

reason for the behavioral gaps and sensory capabilities of various species. For example, dogs can hear better than humans, but humans can see better than dogs. The human brain is designed to handle three to four stimulations at once. **Daniel Levitin**, McGill University psychology professor and author of The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload, explains: "If you get much beyond that [three to four things], you begin to exercise poorer judgment, you lose track of things and you lose your focus."

The symptoms of this external behavioral manifestation of the overload are apparent to all.

People are less available for traditional social interaction. We rarely connect with other people's eyes because they are all buried in their smart phones. Whether we are texting, calling or surfing the web, smart phones have become an essential part of everyday life and culture. Even pre-COVID-19, it was not unusual to see parents out for breakfast with their children using a tablet to keep them occupied instead of directly engaging them.

This is the new way of human communication. The exposure to this seemingly unlimited volume of content, channels and sources could significantly impact our brain's neurobiological pathways and, as a result, the way we experience life.

Over-saturation caused by too much information could also

become a constant source of stress and anxiety. Participants report their concerns about 'information management', 'time management', 'information gaps' and 'agenda setting'. Often, participants report that they find it difficult to decide "where to look first", or "what they want to start with." Previously restricted information is now accessible to all through social media, emails, websites, applications, etc. In addition to impairing participants' ability to make decision, anxiety encourages participants to retreat into the familiar, hence digital tribalism, and look for simple solutions to highly complex problems.

According to educational expert, **The Interaction Design Foundation**, there are some common reasons behind information overload:

Firstly, quantity triumphs. Large volumes of new information create competitive pressure on participants. Content generators feel the need to create and compete within the information system. As a result, participants tend to release large amounts of information, thus flooding the web with quantity rather than quality.

Secondly, technology has lowered the barrier for participation. The very process of creating, sharing and duplicating, has never been easier or simpler. The number of channels one can use to receive information has also seen an exponential increase in the forms of radio, podcasts, television, video, print, web, email,

text, telephones and social media.

Thirdly, the absence of acceptable verification method. Participants face an unprecedentedly high volume of conflicting, contradictory and inaccurate information. There is no commonly used method that can help participants to process, compare and evaluate which informational source is accurate or reliable.

Finally, there is a lack of structure in groups of information generators and almost no way to distinguish the relationships between these groups.

Overload-related anxiety is further boosted by our natural and human fear of missing out or becoming irrelevant. Not being informed as to the 'relevant' and 'important' things can be a major source of anxiety. This 'fear of missing out', commonly known as FOMO, transcends real-life interactions as well. Social media contributes to FOMO as a new source of anxiety. In past years, before Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook-Live, participants couldn't use tracking apps such as "find my friends". They simply didn't exist.

Participants always aspire to be relevant — everyone wants their voice to be heard — and they take their contributions very seriously. But when everyone is heard, no one is really heard. Participants are eager to express themselves. They can now have a new 'social role': be a reporter; sportscaster; storyteller;

blogger; model; food maven; fashion commentator; filmmaker; etc. These new social occupations, which once were monopolized by a handful of gatekeepers, are now highly accessible in a proliferated media environment.

Participants' decision-making in the age of hyper-connectivity and COVID-19 is no exception. Whether participants are looking for information about the spread of the pandemic, immediate medical help, following the performance of the stock market, researching local real estate market, planning retirement; shopping for a new insurance policy, looking to invest in technology, or planning for a wedding — we are all exposed to a tremendous volume of information — most of it irrelevant, unnecessary and even deliberately confusing.

Many vendors and businesses take advantage of the anxiety associated with information overload to sell participants unnecessary products. For example, multiple and duplicate insurance policies is a common market phenomenon and a source of significant waste. Conspicuous consumption, a term made popular by Norwegian-American economist **Thorsten Veblen** in 1929, could be making a comeback largely due to 'information overload'.

So, how does one avoid the potentially harmful impact of 'information overload'?

The first step is limiting, and possibly even completely avoiding,

unnecessary information — this doesn't mean participants should ignore emails and phone calls from their bosses, but they certainly should not feel guilty for their inability to absorb every bit of information out there.

Avoid pressure to take in all information immediately as it comes in, but rather create a list that one can sort through when they have the time.

Filter information as it comes in. This can be done by creating filters in each participant's email and google searches, create a list of news alerts, set up a list of favorite sites and resources, prioritizing the most relevant and accurate information first.

Finally, participants should learn how to quickly skim through loads of new information. It's a skill that can be acquired and can help in finding the needed information in half the time.

*The writer is a former diplomat, Global Distinguished Professor of International Relations at New York University, Member of APCO Worldwide International Advisory Council and Chairman of the Charney Forum for New Diplomacy.

Information Overload   Covid 19   Decision Making   Marketing   Psychology

Discover Medium

Welcome to a place where words matter. On Medium, smart voices and original ideas take center stage - with no ads in sight. Watch

Make Medium yours

Follow all the topics you care about, and we'll deliver the best stories for you to your homepage and inbox. Explore

Become a member

Get unlimited access to the best stories on Medium — and support writers while you're at it. Just $5/month. Upgrade