

Information overload in the age of coronavirus

Many vendors and businesses take advantage of the anxiety associated with information overload to sell participants unnecessary products

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The global crisis created by the [COVID-19](#) pandemic has brought to light a number of great human qualities such as mutual responsibility and compassionate giving. But it has also exposed many systemic deficiencies. One of them is the increasingly dominant “information overload” boosted by hyper-connectivity, which allows participants to access information in an unprecedented fashion with remarkable speed and accuracy.

Coined in 1964 by **Bertram Gross** and popularized by **Heidi and Alvin Toffler** in 1970, information overload has long been studied in psychology and neurology. Most researchers claim it “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 that is needed for survival. This is the main reason for gaps in 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, of McGill University, 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 exposure to an unlimited volume of content 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 anxiety. Participants report their concerns about “information management” and “time management.” It could also impair participants’ ability to make decisions. Anxiety leads participants to retreat into the familiar (hence, digital tribalism), and look for simple solutions to highly complex problems.

Overload-related anxiety is further boosted by our natural and human fear of missing out or becoming irrelevant. The “fear of missing out,” commonly known as FOMO, transcends real-life interactions. Social media contributes to FOMO as a new source of anxiety.

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 the 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.

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 all information, 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. 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 an individual's email and Google searches, creating a list of news alerts, setting up a list of favorite sites and resources, and 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 it can help in finding needed information in half the time.

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