

Information overload essay sample



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Since the beginning of time, information has always been considered a good thing, a means to grow, and a way to develop and sustain culture. In the past, information had often been considered scarce, and truly a privilege to have. Now, information is being produced and received at a rapid rate. Humans cannot process as much information as the amount continuously flowing in. We are in a state of information surplus, an era of information overload.

According to Lehtonen, information discrepancy is the “deficit that arises when we reach our processing limits, but more information continues to stream in.” Having a finite amount of cognitive resources available for any given task, humans are limited capacity processors. Studies have proven that people can only hold seven bits of information at any given time. Therefore, as more people are becoming classified as “active users” in the digital age, overload occurs when a message is more complex than one can remember. In Gibson’s 1984 novel, *Neuromancer*, he predicted a time in which we now live. A time of Nerve Attenuation Syndrome, The Black Shakes, information overload. With the help of the internet, information being produced and consumed is perpetually increasing. Besides the growing use of the internet, there are many other causes of information overload. Firstly, the means by which information is received is continuously increasing as technology advances. People can receive information via telephone, e-mail, instant message, and more. As new information is discovered, people are always updated, and constantly informed about it.

Thus, as we increase our knowledge, we often find ourselves digging through thousands of years worth of historical content as well. In addition, many

sources are unreliable; contradictions and inaccuracies in available information cause information discrepancy and further the overload. Time is taken to review each source, and intake more information. However, even if both sources are accurate, humans have trouble comparing and processing different types of information due to a low signal-to-noise ratio. Lastly, as people are bombarded by information, it is often unrelated, and therefore, cannot be processed correctly, and is often overlooked. As culture progresses, the information overload appears to progress with it. Within minutes people can be overloaded with information on the internet, television, radio, and text messages all at once. E-mails, although appearing to be useful and helpful to numerous businesspeople, in fact cause more trouble than expected. They are a major source of information overload. People cannot keep up with the rate of incoming messages, many of which are considered spam. Furthermore, people have to keep up with the large attachments that are often included in E-mails. The New York Times states that E-mail " has become the bane of some people's professional lives."

Due to information overload, " a \$650 Billion drag" is now on the economy. According to David Shenk's " Data Smog," there are many other negative consequences of information overload as well. Firstly, at such a fast moving pace, according to Boyce's Ergonomics, people now have increased cardiovascular stress. Additionally, people's health is affected by increased exposure to certain information and communication technology. Japanese researchers documented a decline in visual abilities between 1970 and 1990. This is attributed to exposure to television and other forms of technology. In the future, it is predicted that all of Japan will be near-sighted. Not all the

effects however are health-related; some are mental. According to Malhorta in the “ Journal of Consumer Research,” people are unable to efficiently process the information, thus causing mass confusion. This in turn lowers frustration tolerance and cognitive complexity. People are used to things happening now, at a quick speed, and can't be patient.

As information overload increases, quick decision making increases; people's judgment is impaired. Toffler stated that “ When the individual is plunged into a fast and irregularly changing situation, or a novelty-loaded context ... his predictive accuracy plummets. He can no longer make the reasonably correct assessments on which rational behavior is dependent.” Additionally, people are less inclined to help a stranger in need. This is referred to as the “ bystander effect.” Due to an overload of information, people are desensitized, and an individual is less likely to provide assistance as the number of bystanders increases. The belief is that since there are a lot of bystanders, someone else will help out, other than you. Moreover, information overload results in overconfidence. As people believe to have more information, they become more confident in themselves. In truth however, their accuracy has not improved, just their mere judgment. An example of this is provided in Data Smog. As more information is gathered about weather forecasting, skill should theoretically increase to a certain point. However, in reality, due to the effect of limitations, the actual skill tapers off below what it could be. Lastly, people now live with a Continuous Partial Attention or “ CPA.” With so much information, people need to cope and find ways to process the important parts; CPA allows people to do so.

A continuous partial attention is when people pay attention, but only partially. Information is skimmed, reviewed, and analyzed so that one can pick out all the relevant details and move on to the next set of information. It allows one to process more information, but get less out of each resource. It is not meant to optimize a person's information intake, but to merely scan for opportunities and find what one is looking for. This response to overload is an allocation of less time to each input. There are numerous other ways that people respond to overload. Often, people disregard low-priority inputs. If some information is blatantly relevant to what one is looking for, they are more likely to attempt to understand it over something completely unrelated to anything they will ever need. Also, people try to shift the overload to another party. They re-set social standards in order to feel less overloaded. In a group project, although unethical, one might give more research to the partner as opposed to doing it themselves. Also, people are less friendly, and will not respond to people with unfriendly facial expressions, and many people won't answer unlisted telephone numbers.

Moreover, the intensity of each bit of information is reduced by filtering devices; people do not get the full effect of information when they are overloaded with other information. Lastly, in order to help with the overload, specialized institutions are created to absorb information that would otherwise overload the audience. Personally, growing up in the digital age, I have been exposed to numerous information and communication technologies, the primary cause of information overload. I am always on my phone (which happens to be a smart phone), constantly on my computer, and when I'm not doing either of those, I'm watching television or using my

iPod. I often spend hours a day on my cell phone, reading and responding to text messages, going through various E-mails, or just checking Facebook. The amount of advertisements I see a day is innumerable. Whether it be a “sponsored ad” on Facebook, or a spam E-mail, I’m constantly surrounded by advertisements.

Coming from New York, one of the largest cities in the world, I do not feel as overloaded by advertisements as I have in the past; however, as a college student, advertisements are everywhere. Information is everywhere, literally. With every step I take, I can look down and see information regarding a club chalked onto the floor. I can turn my head at any second and see a poster regarding a concert or a show. To cope with the overload, I no longer read newspapers or magazines because I have the television to keep me updated, as well as friends. I am always in constant contact with people I know, and thus, am often bombarded with information. Of the many ways I cope, I often employ CPA. When I receive E-mails to my BlackBerry, only the sender and the subject appear. If I immediately realize that I don’t want to read the E-mail, I delete it and move on. Furthermore, I tend to multitask. As I study, I am listening to music, going on Facebook, and eating. As everything moves at a faster pace, I feel that I cannot complete every task, so I forgo the less important ones. For example, last week I kept putting off cutting my nails because I felt I had more important things to do. Eventually, I had to go to Synagogue for services, and I decided instead of wasting time doing both, I’d cut my nails on the walk to services.

In regards to information overload however, I feel the most overloaded during the week when I go from class to class. The amount of information

received is exponential, and I can by no means process it all. My attention is often lost, and I continue to be bombarded by advertisements and more information each time I walk out of the classroom. I am constantly updated by teachers via E-mail and it often stresses me out. However, I have found ways to cope. I relax, review the information I have received, process the most important, and then choose my course of action. Information overload has positively affected the lives of billions of people around the world; however, much is lost in our “ anytime, anywhere, anyplace, always on” lifestyle. Everyone always needs to be moving in a fast paced society, and media is accelerating. We are losing the original values that the people once emphasized.

Dinner with your family is one of the greatest pleasures, and it is often forgone in order to pursue more information or fit more into the day. Less time is allocated to every activity, and thus the quality of work may decrease. If I wasn't continually distracted by information, I believe I could accomplish a lot more work. I'd be able to concentrate better, and focus on the task at hand, and possibly higher my chances of success in the future. I believe information overload impedes one's ability to do work efficiently. Lastly, continual partial attention, caused by information overload is a communication problem. Although it is technology that is relaying the messages that people get overloaded by, technology is not creating the messages, it's people.