Information Overload?

‘There is too much information out there’ is common refrain we hear.

There are new web channels, more screens (phones, tablets, readers and desktops), more apps (billions of them), and more content: more pages, more websites, more articles. There is just more to absorb or ignore. So much noise, so little signal.

So how does one allocate one’s precious time and attention?

Clay Shirkey, an internet scholar, claims that “there is no such thing as information overload, only filter failure”.

Is it then a question of making sure you have a good filter? Who do you trust to be your filters? Your favourite newspaper is a great example of a trusted filter. The editors of the publication choose what they think is important. Or one can cast a wide net, and use something like Google News, which algorithmically aggregates many information sources.

Once you have your filtered information, what do you do? As Nicholas Carr wrote in his important book, *The Shallows*, we have become worse at paying attention. In his memorable phrase, we used to ‘deep dive into topics, but we’re now become jet-skiers, skimming over the surface of information’.

I’d argue that skimming is exactly the wrong approach for the global information age. Value comes mostly from deep knowledge and expertise, and bouncing from click to click without fully absorbing information leads to a poverty of insight or original thought.

A combination of poor filtering and skimming means that many people find themselves stuck in paying little fragments of attention to lots of things from which they don’t really learn. It might be entertaining to bounce from link to link, but this comes at the expense of absorbing knowledge.

My guess would be the solution is to find a few trusted filters, and pay concentrated attention to these sources. The way I have done this is to have five blogs I regularly read carefully, and try and think and assimilate what they are saying. I’ve found this has been much more satisfying and useful than skimming through forty or fifty less quality blogs. Reading a greater volume of blogs used to leave me coming away thinking I’ve missed some piece of information.

A good insight or perspective can be worth ten times the volume of information. And if your serious about insights, the Harvard Business Review agrees that ‘if you’re serious about ideas, get serious about blogging’.