The Poetics of Information Overload

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Published by University of Minnesota Press

PREFACE

STARS IN MY POCKET LIKE BITS OF DATA

Everybody gets so much information all day long that they lose their common sense.

—Gertrude Stein, "Reflection on the Atomic Bomb" (1946)

It is a very sad thing that nowadays there is so little useless information.

—Oscar Wilde, "A Few Maxims for the Instruction of the Over-Educated" (1894)

There are 3.5 million stars in my pocket—stored in the SkyVoyager app, and mapped instantaneously relative to my position on the Earth's surface. All 924 North American bird species and their songs are included with iBird Explorer Pro. I have nearly unlimited access to music; I can audio-record my entire day; I can record high-definition video and send it wirelessly. There are over forty thousand messages in my Gmail inbox. The world's major newspapers are continually updated by the minute. Thanks to my mobile web browser, I have access to more words than were contained in the National Library of Ireland on June 16, 1904.[1] On that day Leopold Bloom carried the following items in his pocket:

Potato
Kidney
1 ½ pounds Denny's sausage
Letter to Henry Flower from Martha Clifford (and later the crumpled envelope of this letter)
Lemon soap
Card (Henry Flower)
Freeman's Journal
Handkerchief

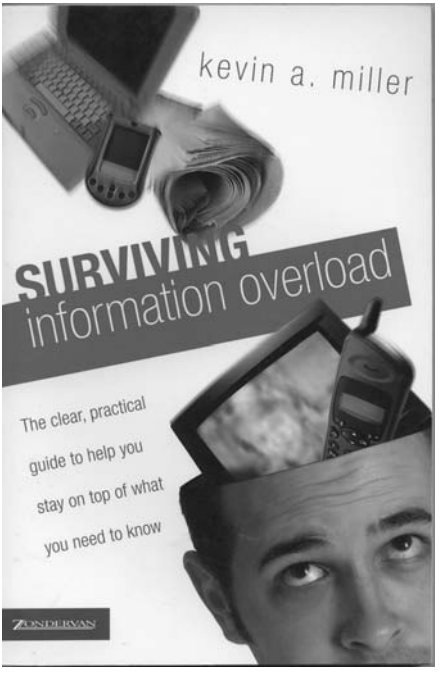
Pocket watch (stops before 8)
French Letter (slang for condom)
Bread
Agendath Netaim advertisement
Chocolate
Sweets of Sin (book)
Pocketbook
Photo of Molly
Assorted monies[2]

It is an eclectic, messy, symbolically laden catalog—leaning heavily toward food and text. Over a century later, an updated version of modernism's iconic everyman would likely carry fewer physical sources of information. The letter, the newspaper, the card, the advertisement, the book, the photo, and the pocket watch could all be supplanted by a four-ounce iPhone (available in Ireland and over two hundred other countries). Bloom's money could easily be replaced with plastic (credit cards of course did not exist in 1904; we are never told whether Bloom has any identification on him). The *Freeman's Journal* Bloom carries contains news of the *General Slocum* disaster in New York Harbor on June 15. Even in 1904, news traveled quickly. Since the introduction of the telegraph, words have traveled with near instantaneity across long distances. In *The Victorian Internet*, Tom Standage quotes the *Daily Telegraph*'s claim in 1843 that "time itself is telegraphed out of existence."[3] F. T. Marinetti claims similarly in his epochal 1909 "Futurist Manifesto," "Time and space died yesterday."[4]

A century later, the statistics are nonetheless astonishing. The problem of information overload is often described as a spreading and dangerous epidemic, although much disagreement exists as to its causes and its cures. According to a recent study by the Global Information Industry Center at the University of California, San Diego, the average American "consumed" one hundred thousand words per day in 2008.[5] Print accounted for only 8.51 percent of words consumed. Television accounted for 44.85 percent while computers accounted for 26.97 percent (not including games). The same study made its biggest headlines by estimating that the average American encounters a total of 36 gigabytes of information daily. The neologism "exaflood" has recently been coined to describe conditions under which "between 2006 and 2010 the

global quantity of digital data will have increased more than six-fold from 161 exabytes to 988 exabytes."[6] To put this in perspective, "in 2003, researchers at Berkeley's School of Information Management and Systems estimated that humanity had accumulated approximately 12 exabytes of data (1 exabyte corresponds to 10^{18} bytes or a 50,000 year–long video of DVD quality) in the course of its entire history until the commodification of computers."[7] More data has been created and stored since the turn of millennium than in the entire history of humanity. The metaphors for the phenomenon—flood, torrent, tsunami, overflow, glut, inundation, saturation—are consistently liquid.[8] James Gleick's recent best seller *The Information: A Theory, a History, a Flood*, for instance, deploys the metaphor in its title.[9] A selection of books published on the topic give a good sense of the life and death, sink or swim, stakes involved: *Data Smog: Surviving the Information Glut*; *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age*; *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives*; *The Overflowing Brain: Information Overload and the Limits of Working Memory*. The preceding titles, it should be noted, are all published by reputable university or trade presses. Far more examples could be drawn from popular self-help literature, as well as from management culture (in the form of books, seminars, proprietary reports, and consulting programs). A brief glance at the covers of information-overload self-help books (Figure 1) gives an idea of the range of issues at play. With perfect postmodern irony, information overload has even created its own self-propelled industry. The consulting firm Basex, which specializes in helping large corporations deal with the phenomenon, routinely grabs headlines in major newspapers with its claim that information overload costs the U.S. economy $900 billion per year (the data on which they base these claims is considered proprietary and is not made public).[10] Basex has even helpfully declared August 12 an annual "Information-Overload Awareness Day."

Science fiction did not prepare us for this—nor did avant-garde poetry, although many of the central aesthetic and political questions with regard to information overload are addressed or anticipated within twentieth-century avant-garde writing. Time and space may have died over a century ago, but information has increasingly taken on a life of its own—literally, according to some, who would ascribe a kind of global noetic consciousness or mathematical sublimity to the vastness of the Internet. In his 1984 novel *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*,



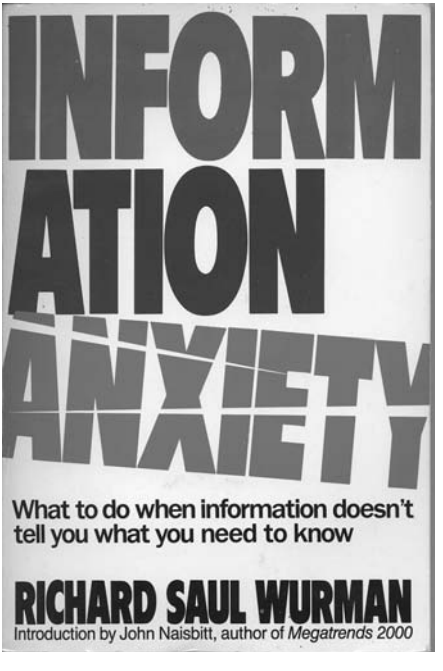
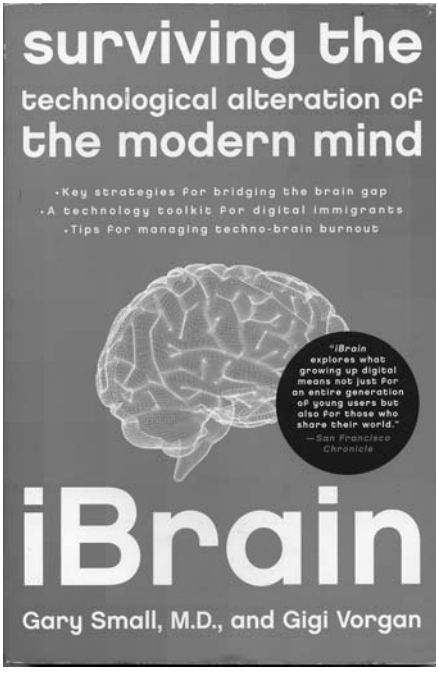
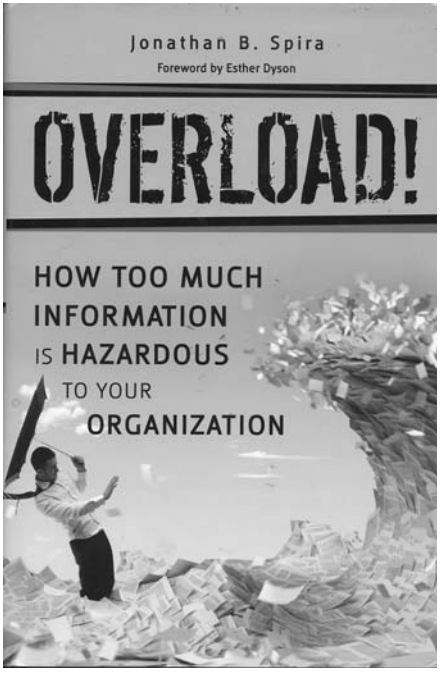


Figure 1. Four examples of information-overload self-help books.


surviving the
technological alteration of
the modern mind
•Key strategies for bridging the brain gap
•A technology toolkit for digital immigrants
•Tips for managing techno-brain burnout
"iBrain explores what growing up digital means not just for an entire generation of young users but also for those who share their world."
—San Francisco Chronicle
iBrain
Gary Small, M.D., and Gigi Vorgan


Jonathan B. Spira
Foreword by Esther Dyson
OVERLOAD!
HOW TOO MUCH
INFORMATION
IS HAZARDOUS
TO YOUR
ORGANIZATION

Samuel Delany presciently described a futuristic communication "web" a decade before Tim Berners-Lee coined the term "World Wide Web."[11] Delany foresaw a future in which there is radical information inequality, but in which it is also possible to travel to six thousand worlds. Delany's novel suggests that more words may not necessarily mean that we will have access to more worlds. For now we only have one world—and we have no choice but to come to terms with instantaneous global flows of information.

The philosopher Bernard Stiegler has recently suggested that we should rethink the pervasive effects of information technology through the lens of what he calls "psycho-power." Although I find this designation problematically vague, I also find it suggestive of the larger range of issues that surround questions of information saturation. For Stiegler, "psycho-power is the systematic organisation of the capture of attention made possible by the psycho-technologies that have developed with the radio (1920), with television (1950) and with digital technologies (1990), spreading all over the planet through various forms of networks, and resulting in a constant industrial canalization of attention which has provoked recently a massive phenomenon of the destruction of this attention that American nosologists call attention deficit disorder. This destruction of attention is a particular case, and an especially serious one, of the destruction of libidinal energy whereby the capitalist economy self-destructs."[12] A number of modern and postmodern narratives coalesce in this passage: the mass media is envisioned as a predatory organism, and technocratic capitalism is seen as essentially at odds with the genuine acquisition of knowledge and experience. Technology in this model essentially holds out innumerable lures that distract us from our real desires. While there is much to be said for Stiegler's provocations, there are also qualifications to be made. Despite reservations about some of Stiegler's more extreme formulations (discussed at greater length below, in the introduction, under the subheading "The Economics of Attention"), I share his concern that the increasing rapidity of capitalism's "creative destruction" process takes a severe toll on individual psyches, as well as exacerbating unequal patterns of information distribution globally.

In a recent commencement address, even the president of the United States referred to the problem. Speaking at the historically black Hampton University, Barack Obama told students that they were "coming of

age in a 24/7 media environment that bombards us with all kinds of content and exposes us to all kinds of arguments, some of which don't always rank that high on the truth meter. And with iPods and iPads; and Xboxes and PlayStations—none of which I know how to work—(laughter)—information becomes a distraction, a diversion, a form of entertainment, rather than a tool of empowerment, rather than the means of emancipation. So all of this is not only putting pressure on you; it's putting new pressure on our country and on our democracy."[13] What is most surprising about this passage is Obama's use of the word "emancipation." As the president noted in his address, Hampton was founded by ex-slaves in 1861. Obama is in a sense presenting a version of what might be called the "dialectic of information": greater access to information does not necessarily lead to increasing enlightenment. The implication would be that both information excess and human bondage are fundamentally antithetical to individual autonomy, and at odds with an "informed" citizenry. Even if this is the case, the moral problem of slavery would seem to be of an entirely different order than that of information overload—one would not, for example, casually refer to "information slavery." The direct target of Obama's concern may be right-wing news outlets such as Fox, but he also expresses a larger generational concern that new information technologies are regressive in their effects on the young. Other than counseling old-fashioned self-control, the president had no practical solutions to offer.

Avant-garde poetry may have a small role to play in our understanding of global information flows; on the other hand, the avant-garde has always aspired to be predictive, to keep up with the present, to stay ahead of history. The avant-garde's attempts to maintain critical distance from mainstream bourgeois values may be grandiose and hyperbolic—but the questions raised by avant-garde movements should not be dismissed as nihilistic or as unrepresentative of larger social developments. To adapt a question posed by Lyn Hejinian—"Isn't the avant-garde always pedagogical?"—I would ask, "Isn't the avant-garde always technological?"[14] Much of the work of the twentieth-century avant-garde was extremely self-conscious of the rapid changes in technologies of communication and data storage. From Dada photomontage to hypertext poetry, avant-garde methodology has been deeply concerned with remediation and transcoding—the movement from one technological medium or format to another.[15] As Brian Reed has recently written,

"Poetry is a language-based art with a penchant for reflecting on its channels of communication."[16] For Reed, poetry "offers unparalleled opportunities for coming to grips with the new media ecology. Poets, as they experiment with transmediation, serially bring to light each medium's textures, contours, and inner logic."[17] While poetry may seem the most non-technological of literary genres, I show that poets were often obsessed by the changing nature of information and its dissemination in the twentieth century. The news that there is more news than we can process is not so new: while avant-garde poetry may not figure prominently in the global information glut, the global information glut figures prominently in avant-garde poetry. However marginal it may seem, poetry will long outlast our current media platforms:

Look at
what passes for the new.
You will not find it there but in
despised poems.
It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.
Hear me out . . .[18]