

Chapter XXXVI

Walking the Information Overload Tightrope

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ABSTRACT

This chapter asks: What is information overload? At what levels of existence does it occur? Are there any features common to information overload at all these levels? What are information overload's types? What are information overload's current and future trends? What problems do they pose? How can they be addressed in both effective and morally justified ways? It argues that there is anarchy concerning the meaning of information overload, that information overload's precise characterization is best left open at this stage in the inquiry, that information overload occurs at the biological, psychological, and social levels, that it is relational, that there are at least two overall types of information overload—quantitative and semantic— involving various kinds and current and likely future trends which pose problems requiring specific ways of dealing with them. The essay closes outlining how to identify effective and morally justified ways of dealing with information overload.

INFORMATION AND INFORMATION OVERLOAD

T.S. Eliot's once asked "Where is the wisdom lost in knowledge and where is the knowledge lost in information?" (Eliot, 1952, p. 96). This essay is written in the spirit of Eliot's question. I will address a particular way in which knowledge, wisdom, and much more can be lost in information, namely, information overload. I will ask: What is

information overload? At what levels of existence does it occur? Are there any features common to information overload at all these levels? What are information overload's types? What are information overload's current and future trends? What problems do they pose? How can they be addressed in both effective and morally justified ways? I will argue for seven main theses: First, there is anarchy concerning the meaning of information overload. Second, the precise characterization of

information overload is best left open at this stage in the inquiry. Third, there is a wide range of levels—biological, psychological, social—at which information overload occurs. Fourth, information overload at each level is relational involving an input and a capacity to process it and respond with an output under specifiable circumstances. Fifth, there are at least two overall types of information overload, quantitative and semantic. Six, current and likely future information overload trends pose problems requiring different ways of dealing with them depending on the nature and circumstances of the overload. Seventh, fully evaluating these trends and policies and decisions concerning them, must partly be carried out in the real world, by those affected, through meaningful dialogue and interaction with various information overload situations and options for dealing with them along the lines of what can be characterized as discursivo-interactive ethics. For this purpose, I will outline an approach (which I discussed in detail elsewhere) for engaging in such dialogue and interactions.

The term “information” derives from the Middle English “informe(n)” and this from the Latin “informare”—to form, in particular, the mind. “To form the mind,” however, has more than one meaning. One is *education*—the development of a person’s general knowledge, judgment and character, i.e., the development of *wisdom*, as in educating the young so that they can live a good life. To those who conceive of education in this manner, however, wisdom is not merely information. T.S. Elliot’s above remark suggests it, and Alfred North Whitehead made it plain when he quipped “Culture is activity of thought, and receptiveness to beauty and humane feeling. Scraps of information have nothing to do with it. A merely well-informed man is the most useless bore on God’s earth.” (Whitehead, 1929, p. 1).

Besides meaning *education*, “to form the mind” also means *instruction* or the communication of rules of reasoning or action—e.g., the rules of inference of a logical system, the grammar of

a language, the rules of etiquette of a culture, the motor vehicle regulations of a state. A third meaning is *training* or the development of particular practical skills—say, how to use a new word processing program, how to drive a motor vehicle, how to swim. Instruction and training, however, are often considered identical to education. This confuses things and exacerbates conflicts with those who conceive of education as aimed at developing wisdom.

Though information has little prestige among the latter, it has much prestige among those who identify education with instruction or training. Further, the term “information” has acquired a wide range of additional meanings—from sensory and other types of input (as in a sweet taste), through data (which need not be structured, e.g., noise), to patterns (which are structured, as in music, and may have causal properties, as in nucleotides in DNA). In fact, today, the term “information” is often used merely as a buzzword in phrases like “Information Age” and “Information Society.” This *meaning overload* of the term “information” is but one of the factors contributing to the unmanageability of what goes under the heading of “information overload.” There are then good reasons to conclude our first thesis: There is anarchy concerning the meaning of information overload.

In attempting to curb this semantic anarchy, one could venture a more focused definition of information overload, say, as an excessive encumbrance of knowledge. Alternatively, one could define information overload in terms of *information theory* or the *mathematical theory of communication*, as an excessive encumbrance of messages imparted (Shannon & Weaver, 1949, *passim*; Hartley, 1928, pp. 535-563). Yet, such attempts might miss significant aspects of information overload by definitional fiat. This provides grounds for our second thesis: The precise characterization of information overload is best left open at this stage in the inquiry. Accordingly, I will address cases which have some claim to

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