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The Effect of Information Overload in Digital Media News Content

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The Effect of Information Overload in Digital Media News Content

■ RENJITH R.*

ABSTRACT

Post-modern society witnessed enormous changes in technology and innovations. As a result, the quick access to relevant information became a nightmare. The digital media contents became abundant and it turned impossible to retrieve useful information when needed. News media also faced such an information overflow. Accurate 'news' became hardly accessible. The internet world delivered manipulated and fake news, thus the integrity of the media is lost. The credibility of the digital media is questioned. This study tries to figure out causes of information overload and how it affected the digital media news content. A survey is conducted to know, how young generation is affected 'Information overload' and tries to find out how they cop-up with the problem. This study also tries to propose empirical answers for this mess. Technology itself has solutions for this problem. Proper use of technological inventions and tools will help us to cop up with 'Information' and 'News' overload.

Keywords : Information Overload, Social Media, Mass Media, Digital Age, News Apps, Information Society

Introduction

The term 'Information Overload' became a cliché nowadays, but it is the major problem that modern society faces. It is ubiquitous and impossible to quantify its extent. The information available now is astonishing and is still continuously growing. An accurate statistics is unable to produce.

This is an age of information explosion. The information database of the world is ever expanding. News media is also producing large amount of information every minute. Information

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Communication became more cluttered. A digital media user receives thousands of information bits every moment and his cognitive ability is unable to process this huge amount of data.

News media organisations are passing through quick and inevitable changes. As in many areas of human life, news media also welcomed new technologies. A huge change is happened in no time, but soon countless problems elevated.

The available information became abundant. News, a part of existing information too became excessive. During the past few years the growth of social media was quick. It helped to easily manipulate, duplicate and share information. All information including news content is manipulated and faked. Thus the problem became worst.

Research Design & Methodology

Data was collected through intensive literature survey, observation and interviews. Content analysis method is used to study the nature of news content in online media. Two online news portals (www.mathrubhumi.com & www.thehindu.com) have been chosen to study the nature of online news content for a period of one month. (November 5 to December 4 of 2015). To study how news is disseminating through social media the news content in facebook.com is observed for period of 30 days. (November 5 to December 4 of 2015).

A survey was conducted among college students to study how *Information Overload* is affected their academic and cognitive aspirations. Simple random sampling technique is used to choose samples. A sample of 200 students of 18 to 25 age group was selected for this purpose. Both under graduate and post graduate students were included in the study. The scholar also interviewed 10 research scholars to confirm how intensively the *information overload* was affected our research field.

Objectives

The study had five major objectives. They were,

1. To understand, what really the *Information Overload* is, and how it affected 'genuine information'
2. To analyse the impact of *Information Overload* in digital media news content

3. To ascertain as to how *Information Overload* has influenced our cognitive abilities
4. To examine as to how *Information Overload* affected academic arena
5. To suggest some pragmatic solutions for the problem of Information Overload

What is Information Overload?

Information Overload is a situation where the presence of too much information prohibits a person to find out required information and it causes difficulty in decision making. It is also called **infobesity** or **infoxication**.

The information can be in the form of texts, images, sound, videos etc. The viral videos in YouTube, countless emails in our inbox, the endless stream of interesting articles on Facebook, innumerable tweets per second in Twitter are some examples of overloaded information. The huge amount of information causes our brain to function stressfully. This will affect our thinking pattern. Our decision making system will remain confused. It will stop us from making good decisions or interrupt from choosing a right option. We will end up by making wrong or delayed decisions.

Information overload had been recognized and addressed as a problem long before in mid-nineteenth century. Scientists like J. Murray Luck, assistant professor of biochemistry at Stanford University, pointed out that they are failed to reassemble appropriate information for their research work. Later in a report of the U.S. President's Scientific Advisory Committee's in 1963, addressed the same problem. The phrase '**Information overload**' is first mentioned in '*The Managing of Organizations*', a book by Bertram Gross in 1964. But it was popularised by the futurologist **Alvin Toffler** in 1970, in his book '**Future Shock**'. He predicted that information abundance will cause big problems in near future.

Information overload became a menace in academic and business sectors. When two or more type of information is available in the same subject or idea, there is a possibility of misperception. But here the available information is literally massive. Digital media provides thousands of web pages in fraction of a second in a single search. It becomes hardly possible to pick the required bit of information within the available time. Information becomes useless when it could not be accessed in right time.

Digital Media

Nowadays all the media devices became digital in a sense. But, in this study, online media and equipment including computers, smartphones, tablets, phablets, etc. are considered as digital media.

World Wide Web became common for the last half a century. Advent of modern computers caused information to duplicate and spread faster. Social media became a 'must' in everybody's life and allowed people to become news editors or manipulators. These duplicated information spread through World Wide Web. Many of the information are manipulated. People started to access news content through digital media, which mainly include online media. Thus digital media devices connected to the internet have a significant role in causing Information Overload.

Information Overload in News Content

News Overload is a part of information overload. The news content produced by media organisations and other sources becomes profuse. Different news organisations are treating same news event differently. As a result numerous versions of the same news would be produced.

Nowadays internet, more specifically, social media is spreading the different versions of the news in no time. The audience has a profound role in disseminating these news items. They are choosing a version which is supporting their views and ideologies and sharing. The vested interest in a particular subject leads to misinterpretations. In fact, most of the time these manipulated information is sharing through the internet. Thus the real audience became confused. The vast amount of information prevent them from accessing the right information.

News is also an information and it gets polluted by duplication and manipulation. By analysing and confirming all the information accessed from the net in the same topic, the right information could find. But the user will lose enormous time and productivity. Thus *News Overload* too causes problems in day-to-day life of the audience.

Information Overload: Causes

Nowadays devices having internet access, like computers, smartphones, tablets and many other digital devices are the major

mediums to diffuse information. A wide variety of sources are there to run-off information. Social media and other online resources are the primary cause of information overload. The same news item is repeatedly distributed from different news sources. These information could be fake and authenticity is always dubious. The primary reasons of information overload are,

1. Widespread access to the Internet
2. Rapid rate of new information production
3. Social Media and Internet Sharing
4. Ease of information duplication and transmission
5. Increasing number of information channels of the same news content
6. Absence of tools to organise information
7. Lack of content filtering tools
8. Ignorance in accessing the sources using various information tools
9. Ambiguities in available information
10. Contradictions with newly created information

Information Overload: Consequences

When considering the societal consequence, information overload is always disrupts social development. It prevents accumulating new knowledge, thus delays new inventions. Persons are the building blocks of the society. Thus, personal consequence do matter. Some of them are mentioned below,

1. Causes Untidiness
2. Kills Time
3. Increases Stress and Anxiety
4. Destroys Self Confidence
5. Challenges cognitive capacity
6. Analysis Paralysis
7. Reduces Productivity
8. Fails to stay in-focus

9. Stops from taking decisions and actions

10. Monetary Loses

Information overload causes confusion in absorbing facts, which in turn causes to reduce peace of mind. The lack of attention reduces concentration in works. Overloaded information causes to lose precious time. Thus we will lose productive outcome. Information Overload leads to spend more time to catch the necessary information. This reduces available time and causes stress and anxiety. Information Overload often causes *Analysis Paralysis* or Paralysis by Analysis. It is a state of never taking a decision or action by over thinking (analysing), as a result paralysing the outcome.

Technology and Mass Media

Technology has specific purposes in human life. We used technology to improve our lives. Man used some techniques to make fire. These techniques are the first form of technology that propelled human growth. Each generation of the human kind improved existing technology or invented new.

Mass media adapted latest technology to flow information. State-of-the-art technologies are incorporated in gathering, processing and disseminating the news. The very same technology is used by the audience to receive the news. Technology allows a journalist to send a news story as soon as it occurred to the audience. New technological gadgets allows a user to know the latest updates live.

Communication technology is a collection of technological inventions which helps to communicate fast and effectively. The first decade of the 21st century witnessed a massive progress in the field of communication technologies.

Technology always helps us to improve the quality of our lives. We incessantly used technological advancements to accomplish our tasks perfectly and without any flaws. But, there were many side effects for the use of technology. One of them is Information Overload. The focus of information overload increased when information technology grown.

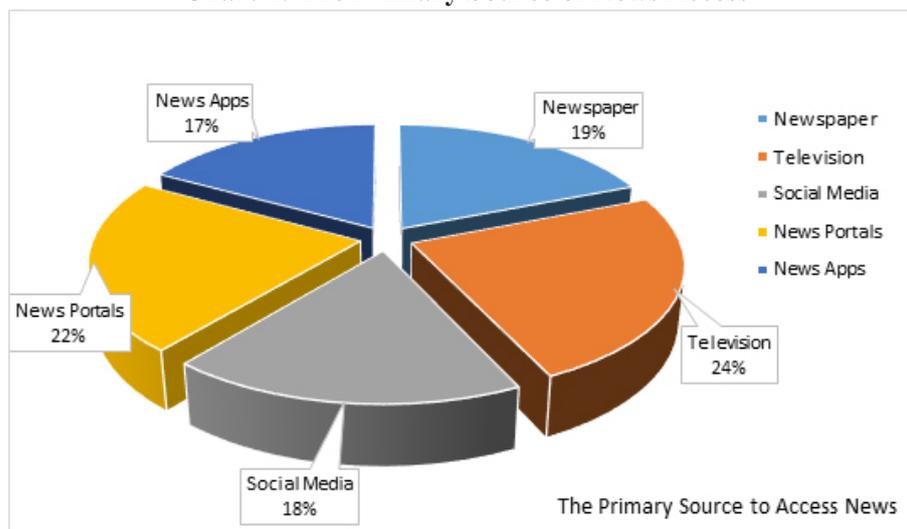
We are prone to get addicted to those technological supplements. Nowadays, people get up in the morning and first check their smartphone for new updates. They are always online and are virtually connected to their friends. But, often it becomes an addiction.

It is true that technology help us to do a task quickly. It make possible to communicate fast. But also it consumes more time too. People always use the very same technology for entertaining themselves. Most of the time unwanted and time killing communications occur. As a result productivity declaims fast.

Analysis and Findings

As part of the study the researcher has conducted a survey among 200 college students to know their news habits and the effect of *Information Overload* in them. Also a content analysis is done in two news portals to know the nature of digital news content. The researcher also analysed the sharing of news content in *facebook*.

Chart 1: The Primary Source of News Access



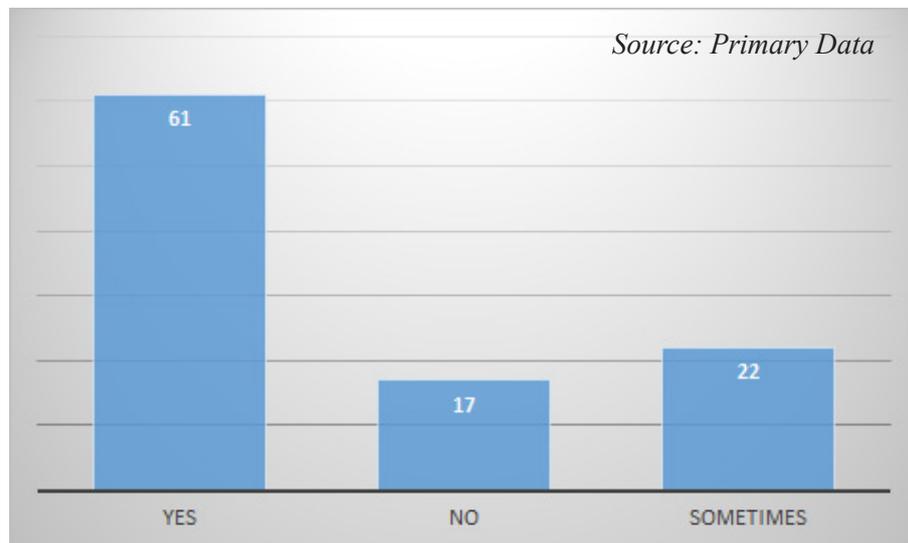
The *Chart 1* shows that 57% of the respondents depend internet based services as a primary source of news access. The other 43% depends conventional media like Television and Newspaper.

68% of the respondents believe that social media is a cause of information overload. 61% of the students also agrees that they are affected by information overload (See *Chart 2*). 56% of the students strongly agrees that *Information Overload* influence their academic activities. 23% of them partially agrees to this argument. 21% of the scholars disagrees with this statement. They believes that academic activities are not always depends online researching. Books, personal

interviews, surveys and participant observation are also the methods of data collection. Experts will also help to reach accurate data. Consulting with experts is a good method to eradicate the problem of congested information sources.

40% of the respondents are using News Apps to know daily news. They are interested in using apps which has a collective news database from various news sources. That is they are not interested in using independent news apps of the news media organisations like *The Hindu*, but they use news apps like *dailyhunt* (formerly *newshunt*) which is a collaborative news app of numerous news sources. It even supports regional language news sources.

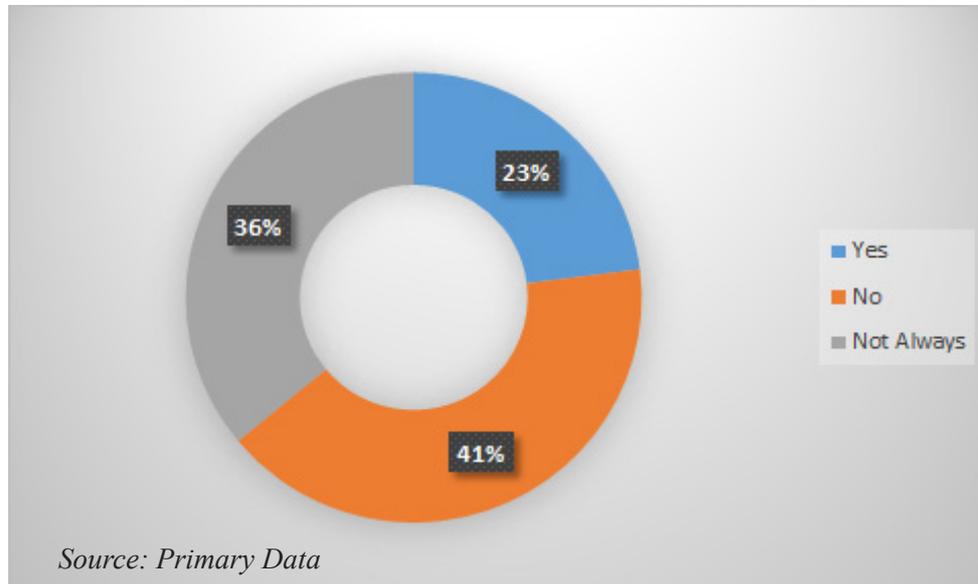
Chart 2: Respondents who believes that, they are affected by Information Overload



Information overload causes anxiety and stress. It leads to lack of focus and confidence. All of the respondents agrees that they felt any one of the symptoms or more than one symptoms when handling with information.

Chart 3 shows that 77% percentage of the respondents are not agrees that the news shared through social media are credible. 23% of them are explains that internet itself helps them to confirm whether the news is fake or not. Therefore if there is any doubt, options are there to double or triple check the fact.

When analysing these facts, it is obvious that information overload is affecting academic activities too. Online data mining is

Chart 3: Respondents who trust on news in social media

not at all easy to the scholars. 75% of the scholars are unaware of the content filtering tools and they are unable to check the validity of the information found from the internet.

New Aspects

The modern society termed 'information overload' as a negative aspect. But it is the case of perspective. The lack of information is the actual problem. But we have information, and it is everywhere, and it is positive. Only problem is that, relevant information is hidden and not accessible easily. Therefore we need some techniques to find out the information we need.

When redefining the meaning of information, 'Information overload became a problem when a user become unable to find out relevant information using his own knowledge and acquired techniques.'

We are reluctant to learn new techniques, that's the real problem. Technology itself has solutions. For instance, when searching in Google, we can use operands like AND, OR, NOT etc to get more relevant results. Putting a double quote (") between the most relevant word in the search keywords will give more precise search results.

Eg: Smartphones NOT tablets > it will exclude 'tablet phones' from search result

How to Alleviate Information Overload?

If technology is the primary cause of information abundance, technology too has solutions. Intelligent use of technology will eliminate the actual problem for sure.

Information overload grown as a wide problem in the society. Elimination of information overload is not at all impossible. Well organised information is easy to handle. Our information media is not organised and diffusing vague ideas to the society. New information channels like social media causes to duplicate and manipulate news contents.

Researchers can easily collect relevant data and can complete their works in lesser time. Internet traffic will reduce and thus the bandwidth can use more productively for the growth of business, academic and other purposes supporting national growth. Quick access of relevant data will help us to save time and that will help to concentrate on our real jobs. (Productivity Increases). Librarians can organise books and documents in more proper and easily accessible.

How to Get Access to the Relevant Information?

Organising online content intelligently will eliminate unwanted information. These are some techniques useful to retrieve online as well as offline information.

1. Prioritise the information needed
2. Identify the unwanted information
3. Observation continuously
4. Keep a Disciplined and Organised Mind
5. Planning before retrieving information
6. Create a precise idea about what is going to access
7. Use specific terms to search
8. Write down the ideas immediately
9. Learn search strategies
10. Connect with known information
11. Evaluate the retrieved content
12. Use only trusted sources

13. Say No to irrelevant Information
14. Not accept more than five results at a time
15. Use smartphone Apps
16. Use Google alerts, Feed Aggregators etc to get relevant updates
17. Use tools like 'Gmail Tabs' to organise e-mails

In shopping, we often ignore thousands of items and picking the right one in no time. How is it being possible? Either we know the brand of the particular product, or ask our friends for opinion about a product. Then compare with products of other brands and make a choice to buy one you are convinced with. Choosing the right information is similar to it. Source is very important like a brand name. Always depend on credible sources, and re-analyse its credibility occasionally.

We need organised and '*easy to access*' databases. The unimportant, irrelevant information should be destroyed. Internet contains mass amount of duplicate information. Same idea is duplicated thousand times and it should be cut down. Using modern algorithms it is easy to scan and filter duplicated information. This will assure quality and unambiguous information.

News Apps

There are thousands of smartphone *apps* to distribute news content. Prominent news organisations have their own standalone news apps. But, it is not easy to install and use all of them to know daily news. It also leads to 'News Content Overload'.

But there are efficient apps to gather and distribute news from different sources. They are not merely collecting and showing news. There is a smart filtering occurs and choosing only the most relevant pieces of information and assembling in a disciplined manner. The users also have a control over the apps. They can customize the options as per their tastes.

Some popular and useful news apps are shown below,

1. **Yahoo News Digest:** Yahoo News Digest App provides a summary of all the important need-to-know news. A short digest of 9-11 news items will show twice a day (Morning 8 O'clock and Evening 6 O'clock)

2. **Flipboard:** Flipboard is a personal news magazine App. A user can create personal magazines. The animated interface will help the user for easy navigation.
3. **Google News & Weather:** Google News is a computer-generated news App. It aggregates worldwide news headlines from various news sources. For readers' convenience it groups similar stories together and displays them. Users can personalise news items according to their preference and interests.
4. **Feedly:** Feedly helps to read personalised RSS feeds from various websites, blogs, YouTube channels etc.
5. **Dailyhunt (Newshunt):** This app provides news updates as it happens. It supports many Indian regional languages (Including Malayalam). Users can customize their news sources according to their language preferences.
6. **News Republic:** Shows latest news from trusted news sources. This app is also user customisable. Provides news according to the user's preferences. Animated keyword map will help a user to choose news content easily.
7. **Appy Geek:** Appy Geek is a technology news app. It offers most comprehensive news in tech world including mobile, gadgets, wearable gadgets, product info, science, and tech culture.
8. **SmartNews:** News content in short videos.

Conclusion

The accumulation of information and communication of pertinent information is the indication of human growth. Without new and upgraded information human race won't survive. But, it is also essential to communicate or hand over proper or needful information in a proper way in right time. We can't stop the production of new knowledge. So, we need to think differently by changing our attitudes towards the problem. It is imperative to find out novel ways to tackle information overload. As we know, technology primarily causes information overload. The same technology can use to reduce the problem. News is a part of information system. But nowadays the credibility of the news contents is lost. The major reason for this phenomenon is that the digital media handles news and related information as a means to spread hatred.

As discussed in this article, having too much of information is not at all a problem. If technology caused abundance of information and confusion, we have to use the very same technology to eliminate that problem. The future of technological innovations is artificial intelligence (AI). If AI can be used to control and arrange information systems it will avoid duplications, return better search results and keep the database organised.

There should be a filtering mechanism in Media industry too. Media organisations should formulate new policies to avoid insignificant news disbursement. News media should retaliate to reclaim their credibility. It is very essential for a growing society to tackle information overload.

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