Surviving in a Sea of Information

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Today's youth are drowning in a sea of Internet-fed information. And the increased amount of time young people spend on the Internet raises the question, "What do they do online?"

Following trends in many other societies, Bhutanese parents complain that their children are "addicted" to the screen. There has been a fundamental shift in the way that youth—the digital generation—communicate today. Online games are sweeping Bhutanese homes, with children as young as two glued to their parents' smartphones or tablets. Sometimes, parents rely on these high-tech gadgets to keep children occupied when they are busy. But they are also uneasy that their children are more tech-savvy and comfortable with activities that the older generation do not understand.

This raises many questions about the impact of excessive information on the behaviour, media consumption patterns, and social interaction skills of the young.

The media landscape has undergone rapid change with the advent of the Internet and the onslaught of social media. Information and Communication Technology (ICT), a gateway to millions of sources, has put information at children's fingertips instantaneously. In this digital age, many find it difficult to balance their time between family and work. Even parents and elders are caught up in a world of ubiquitous screens and rapidly improving bandwidth.

According to researchers from the University of California at Berkeley's School of Information, mankind has produced more information in the last 30 years than in all the previous 5,000 years. The sheer volume of information now available online is staggering. There are around 50 billion pages on the Web. From websites to emails to tweets and text messages, children are receiving input at an unprecedented rate and volume, writes Dr. Jim Taylor, adjunct faculty, University of San Francisco.

Having too much information to digest is known as *information overload* and almost everyone suffers from it to some degree. It can cause stress, anxiety, fatigue, frustration, reduced productivity, an inability to concentrate and feelings of being

overwhelmed and overburdened—eroding work efficiency as well as personal health and family life. Information overload threatens our ability to educate ourselves and leaves us more vulnerable as consumers and less cohesive as a society. For many of us, it diminishes our control over our own lives.

Psychiatrist E.M. Hallowell calls the neurological effect of information overload Attention Deficit Trait, or ADT. In the *Harvard Business Review*, Hallowell wrote:

> It isn't an illness; it's purely a response to the hyperkinetic environment in which we live…When [someone] is desperately trying to deal with more input than he possibly can, the brain and body get locked into a reverberating circuit while the brain's frontal lobes lose their sophistication, as if vinegar were added to wine. The result is black-and-white thinking; perspective and shades of gray disappear. People with ADT have difficulty staying organised, setting priorities, and managing time, and they feel a constant low level of panic and guilt.

Usually researchers examine information overload from an adult's point of view and with adult subjects. But children also enjoy the same benefits and suffer the same frustrations of the Information Age.

"Even in elementary schools, seeking information becomes a worldwide act," writes Lynn Akin, Adjunct Assistant Professor at Texas Woman's University Denton, Texas. The effect on family relationships of both the overload and the constant connectivity is chilling. Not only do parents have much less time to devote to each other and to their children, but even when they are together their interactions are quite different than previously.

The education landscape too is changing with the increasing popularity of online instruction. Higher education is in dramatic flux. Use of computers, software and distributed networks is growing in classrooms. Driven by the changing expectations of stakeholders, demands from employers, and perceptions of learners themselves, youth today must seek ways to adapt to the shifting environment. Employers want students with the critical thinking skills necessary to compete in a global economy.

The Internet and television were introduced to Bhutan as late as 1999. By June 2016, there were 21,460 fixed telephone users, 686,227 mobile subscribers and 533,914 Internet subscribers in Bhutan. This doesn't include local area networks and Wi-Fi within offices and homes. This gives an idea of how popular the Internet has become in a short time in Bhutan. For all its benefits, the real danger for Bhutanese

youth is that they will feel they are drowning in the torrent of information, as their illiterate parents cannot guide them on Internet usage.

Dr. Bunty Avieson of Sydney University observes that in Europe and elsewhere, the revolutions of print followed by electronic and digital media occurred over centuries, as did the political and social transformations they facilitated. In Bhutan, these revolutions are occurring simultaneously. In the same decade that a newspaper industry was launched in the country, television and digital communications technologies, including mobile telephones, were launched. With the availability of cheap smartphones and the Internet, youth are enveloped in an environment of constant information and distraction. And so they have less time to concentrate on their studies and process information in productive ways.

While digital information has a lot of benefits, excessive exposure to such information can lead to cognitive overload and "techno-stress". The Internet can also subject users to phenomenon like cyber-bullying, sexting and "Facebook depression".

"There is a lot of pressure to stay informed about what your friends are doing, what's going on in the world and what's happening in your profession," Dr. Barreau observes, "but there is not so much pressure anymore for people to have time to sit down and quietly think and reflect." Downtime is important for our emotional and mental health, as well as for deeper thinking about the larger issues of life, such as why we are here and where we are going.

Today, both youth and adults spend an increasing amount of time interacting with their technology instead of socialising with friends and family. It is common to see people when dining out fiddling with their cell phones or absorbed in their tablets rather than conversing with their friends or family. Years ago, sociologists were concerned that families were spending their evenings staring at the TV. The concern today is that family members are on their smartphones surfing the web, watching videos and TV, reading and texting messages.

The scenario is no different in schools and colleges. Even in classrooms without computers or Internet access, students have other devices to draw their attention away from study. Cell phones are prohibited in many schools, but that doesn't stop students putting them on vibrate/silent mode and exchanging text messages under their desks. Many teachers in Bhutan say their students send tweets and text messages to each other while they lecture the class. Not only is this disrespectful, it divides students' attention and reduces learning outcomes.

Exposure to digital pornography is an emerging issue in Bhutan, according to a National Commission for Women and Children report launched in October 2016 in which more than 20 percent of children reported exposure to pornography. With almost universal access to cable television and the Internet, discovering pornography even as a pre-teen may have become a part of normal adolescence in many societies.

The report encourages adults and welfare agencies to engage with its findings to investigate whether exposure to digital pornography impacts the sexual behaviour of adolescent boys towards both female and male peers. It is also important to recognise the potential dangers that children and young people expose themselves to by searching for pornography, especially in a world in which sexual predators are omnipresent. As new generations become more online savvy in exploring the world through the Internet, it is essential to keep up to date on teenage online practices, says the report.

Being Information-Savvy

The impact of information overload is inescapable and needs to be addressed urgently. A growing body of literature shows that information and its technologies cannot solve all society's problems, but society and social resources can solve many of the problems of both information and technology. There is no "users' manual." As Ulrich Weger, a senior lecturer in psychology at Kent University says: "If you can make use of something that makes your life easier while maintaining enough inner strength and freedom to avoid dependence, you are the master. If you do not cultivate this inner strength and freedom, you become the slave."

Much of the literature on information overload recommends filtering most of it out by ignoring it. Clay Shirky, a New York University news-media professor, says: "It's not information overload. It's filter failure". People worry that they might miss something so read everything that comes up, even if it is totally unrelated—or they keep looking for information that matches their mood.

Other solutions to information overload are to prioritise important activities, schedule your email checks, and don't take your smartphone to bed. You don't need to read everything or watch all the videos that your friends have liked/shared on social media. You just can't finish everything!

Technology has become an essential part of today's lifestyle. We can't avoid it. But we don't need to become its slaves. If you are a parent, you can help your children

negotiate the tide of information overload by engaging them in conversation about information. Some researchers suggest mindfulness and meditation, as well as taking time for face-to-face interactions throughout the day, can help overcome information overload. There is no single solution to handling the vast quantities of information we face daily. Collaboration between providers and users should be encouraged, and government and relevant agencies need to promote information literacy programmes and policies.

The ICT policy and curricular changes taking place in Bhutan are a welcome move. Media literacy programmes in schools and colleges can teach our youth how to use ICT but use it smartly so that we create a generation of citizens able to negotiate the bewildering world of digital transformation.

The Ministry of Information and Communications' social media policy is a good start. It aims to encourage all Bhutanese, starting with civil servants, to use social media to benefit society. Implemented well, it could be an answer to the increasing volume of mental junk on social media sites in Bhutan and help combat discussions that taper off into personal attacks. The desired outcome is a society with the wisdom and maturity to take advantage of digital transformation, not be controlled by it. Internet service providers could also be encouraged to filter harmful information, including pornography, while still addressing the information needs of citizens.

As Peter Lyman and Hal R. Varian, senior researchers at the University of California noted: "The challenge is to learn to swim in that sea (of information), rather than drown in it."