

Cheng Chat: The Problem with Information Glut



By Richard Kearney

On the eve of the launching of the first operational web browser 22 years ago, the great public intellectual Neil Postman wrote:

"[T]elegraphy created the idea of context-free information - that is, the idea that the value of information need not be tied to any function it might serve in social and political decision-making and action."

Following a century of further technological development, Postman assessed the status of information in these terms:

"Information has become a form of garbage, not only incapable of answering the most fundamental human questions but barely useful in providing coherent direction to the solution of even mundane problems.... [In our culture] the tie between information and human purpose has been severed, i.e., information appears indiscriminately, directed at no one in particular, in enormous volume and at high speeds, and disconnected from theory, meaning, or purpose."

Keep in mind that Postman was writing BEFORE the web and all it has wrought.

Today, at some level, almost everyone recognizes that information glut has become a serious problem.

Without sufficient context to provide controls, the deluge of information can become mind-numbing. Confronted with endless messages from all directions and in no particular order, we regard much of the glut as trivial, random, and meaningless. And with good reason.

It isn't just the explosion of commercial speech and advertising, or government and corporate propaganda, but also the glut in all other forms of information, delivered in countless ways, which have driven people to come up with various coping strategies.

For some, the best way to manage information glut is by carving out a customized social media world filled with like-minded "friends" who tell us only what we want to hear and little else.

For others, the practical approach is to hope the automated search technologies we use every day will reward our confidence in them with useful and meaningful answers to our questions.

But this confidence is often misplaced, in part because these strategies rely on technologies that have helped create the problem in the first place.

It makes perfect sense to avoid the fatigue that can come from information overload. But students still need to use information. What to do?

Libraries don't claim to have any magic solution to the problem of information glut. Some people even think libraries are part of the problem, while others believe libraries have become irrelevant in an age when access to information no longer seems to be a problem.

What libraries can offer is a dedication to the critical importance of context, and professional expertise in organizing the information we provide. We have as little use for trivial, random, and meaningless information as you do.

Libraries are all about making the connections that make information useful to you, in portions that will satisfy. So when you're feeling overwhelmed or disoriented by too much information, please pay us a visit. Because the last thing you need going into Thanksgiving is a severe case of information indigestion.