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Information Competence or Infotainment - where are we heading?

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Abstract

Information overload is a problem in today's information society. Two possible answers to information overload are investigated: Information competence and Infotainment. Information competence is a skill that is increasingly needed and information specialists have an important role in coaching and teaching this skill. Infotainment as a trend is growing and the next generation of clients are much influenced by Infotainment. This will affect the information professionals when providing information services and delivering information.

Information overload

Think of this scenario: You need a new washing machine.

In this very moment you become aware of that there is a huge amount of washing machines out there waiting for you to buy them. You get to know about them in prospects and special offers coming to your mailbox, commercials in television, ads in newspapers and magazines. Which one to choose? Which one has the longest lifetime, washes your clothes brilliantly clean and quick, has the lowest energy consumption, and is noiseless and cheap? In your desperation you do a search on the Internet to see if you find any evaluations of washing machines. You type in the words "evaluation" "washing machines" in Google's search bar and get 55,500 hits with tips. What you then long for is a trustworthy friend who can advise you. Alas, no such friend in sight. Anyhow, you go to the shop to buy one you found in a prospect, a machine that looked nice and was within your budget, and absolutely the best one according to the sales man. First you feel rather content that the thing is fixed but soon you become uncertain if you have made the right choice. Therefore you still have washing machines in your mind, and see ads all the time for machines that are cheaper and have more nice features than the one you bought. Wrong choice again!

This is a daily situation to cope with: A lot of information, a lot of alternatives and a lot of choices to make. It takes time and energy and can cause stress and frustration when we make the wrong decisions, which we of course often do, as much of the information is aiming at making us feel that way.

We live in a society of information overload, we get

- too many hits on the Net



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- too many reports to read in our job
- too many power point presentations to listen to or, worst case, read
- too many meetings to attend
- too many offers and mails in our physical and electronic mailboxes.
- too much "must read" information in order to be a good colleague, citizen or parent.

When I, however, say that we live in a society of information overload, this is not true for all world citizens and there are also some serious gaps in which parts of the world that we get information from; 96% of the Internet hosts in the world were year 2000 located in USA, Europe and Japan. Sub-Sahara Africa only counted for 0.25% of the total Internet hosts (1). I want you to keep this in mind, because the phenomena which I am talking about are not applicable everywhere.

What are then the answers to information overload? I will here explore two tracks: the Information Competence track and the Infotainment track. There is another track that I won't talk about today: Information stress which I am convinced is one cause for burnt-out illness that plagues many persons today (2).

Information competence

I use the terms Information Competence and Information Literacy as synonyms. However, I prefer the term Information Competence because it is easier to understand at least in the corporate world which I have been part of for many years.

In "Directory of Online Resources for Information Literacy" (3) you find the following definition of information literacy: "the ability to locate, evaluate, and use information to become independent life-long learners". Information Competence is defined in the same encyclopaedia as "the ability to find, evaluate, use, and communicate information in all of its various formats".

Christina Doyle has the following criteria for an information literate person as one who

- "Recognizes that accurate and complete information is the basis for intelligent decision making
- Recognizes the need for information
- Formulates questions based on information needs
- Identifies potential sources of information
- Develops successful search strategies
- Accesses sources of information including computer-based and other technologies
- Evaluates information
- Organizes information for practical application
- Integrates new information into an existing body of knowledge



- Uses information in critical thinking and problem solving (4). "

To be information competent is an advantage today. To be able to quickly find and select information, as well as to evaluate it and to integrate it in existing and coming knowledge, is and will be a major contribution to success in personal and professional lives. A person fulfilling Doyle's criteria to the last point is however a world class information literate person or an information specialist by profession. This ambition level is probably difficult to obtain for the main part of the population, who doesn't have information as a profession, but who none the less need to acquire information competence. Information specialists have an important role to play in teaching and coaching information competence improvements, and in order to do so we need to both define a realistic target, and to analyse the actual level of information competence.

If the target is fulfilling at least main parts of Doyle's information literacy criteria, then what is the status of end users information competence?

Firstly let me outline a possible divergence in end users' and information specialists' perceptions of end users' information competence by giving some comments that I have heard and read.

The end user's opinion	The information specialist's opinion
I find everything I need on the Net.	Internet contains a lot of trash.
I am good at information searching.	You waste too much time without finding valuable information.
I find what I need.	You don't know what you miss.
I don't need help.	You need to be trained and guided.
I don't need more information, I have enough.	You need more qualitative information.
I validate the information I find.	You take everything on the Internet for granted; if you just find something you are happy no matter the quality.

Taken to the extreme point this can cause a real battle between information specialists and end users!

A recent report by Outsell (5), that is regularly investigating the information content market, showed that end users are often quite content with their search abilities and the information they find on their own. This is partly due to that they don't know what they don't know, but there is also, I am convinced, a real improvement in searching and validating behaviour. The main contributor to this is of course the World Wide Web that by now is over ten years old.



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Information specialists with the objective to train and guide clients need to find out on what level they are when it comes to information competence. It requires empathy as well as delicacy. At the same time we must claim respect for our special competence - the same investigation from Outsell revealed how little end users understand the expertise of an information specialist. I think that many of us have struggled with this lack of understanding. It is not that easy to on the one hand realise and take the consequences of that end users can themselves do what used to be our monopole: search and find information and on the other hand assert the unique competence that goes with our education and profession.

One aspect of information competence that I want to especially highlight is the ability to manage information. I have often heard from clients that the problem of today is not to find information; the problem is to manage it. Manage information is thus a value adding service that information specialists often do for their clients, and it's in my opinion an area that needs to be explored even more in the future. By tradition activities to organise information and make it retrievable are within the information specialists' domain, and these activities are fairly well recognised. There is however another activity within this area that is in my opinion too little highlighted: the value adding activity to refine information.

Quite often you hear that no real value is added unless the information is analysed and prepared for a busy decision maker to use it directly. It is however a misunderstanding that value is added only when information is analysed and transformed to intelligence. A lot of value is actually added in the process of selecting the right information source, selecting the relevant information, and structuring and packing the information so that it is well-arranged and easy to proceed with.

When an information specialist is doing an information research for a client she should call the deliveries "refined information" instead of just information, to make visible the skills and efforts required to do it. Refined information is what she is actually delivering even if the extent of refinement varies depending on the clients need, and on her own skills and resources.

A challenge for the profession in the coming days is to teach and coach the end users even in the managing information process and to participate in the ongoing development of computerised tools for such a process.

Over to Infotainment, another answer to information overload or rather an answer to the ever increasing battle for the scarce resource "attention".



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Infotainment

"**Infotainment**, also known as soft news, provides information in a way that is entertaining to its viewers. The information in infotainment programming consists of mostly celebrity news and human drama." (This definition I have fetched from SmartPedia (6) and it implies television, but of course Infotainment occurs in other types of media as well.)

Infotainment is an old phenomenon that is growing rapidly as the competition between different types of media for the attention hardens. Structural changes in the telecom industry and new communication technology have contributed to demolish the walls between news and entertainment and to the increase in the offering of channels. In both print media and television the infotainment part of the news reporting is steadily increasing. Some figures from the United States illustrate this: For example the news stories with sensational content have risen from 25% in 1980 to 40% in 2001 (7). The transformation of serious news to infotainment was disgustingly represented in the Gulf war in 1991 by reporters commenting missile attacks with: "Wow, here is another one".

Not only can it be questioned from the ethical point of view, but infotainment also often leads to disinformation (deliberately or not): important information is omitted or the message is twisted to an emotional appeal.

However, not everything is bad about Infotainment - the Infotainment approach can be used to transmit useful but boring information to its target group. There are many examples of "serious" information that is supplied in a pleasant and entertaining way, which makes it easier to digest and remember.

I see signals in the corporate world that even information needed for the work draws closer to Infotainment.

- The use of power point presentations as the only reporting medium. Nobody has time and energy to read full reports without pictures.
- The story telling trend - this reinvented way to attract the audience's interest for a subject is more and more recommended.
- The use of the "systematic guessing"-method for analysing (8). This means in worst case that a group of identical decision makers sit around a table and guess about movements in their business environment. (They can do it quickly as they all have similar perceptions!)
- The choice of information sources is based on ease, not on quality. (This however has long been the case).
- Use of the same means for promotion internally as for promotion to outside customers, due to the need to be visible, to attract attention to yourself, your business and your projects.



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- The "zapping generation" is joining the workforce; they are impatient, used to information excess, digital media, Infotainment and bits and pieces.

Where are we heading?

The trends which I have been talking about affect the information profession not the least as the client's requirements are changing. The "zapping generation" is and will become our clients. They have neither time nor patience enough to read and digest large amounts of information. Rather they want just the pieces they need at the moment served in an easy, convenient and appealing way. Stephen Abram has expressed it concisely in his lecture on dead technologies at a SLA conference: "Literacy dead - patience dead" (9). Moreover, the information industry must address this issue. One of the trends, predicted by Outsell, is to provide granular of information to specific workflows (5).

What will then win the trend, Infotainment or Information Competence? If you want to go where the money is, go for Infotainment! Infotainment trend will continue and develop even more, I am convinced. It will also be used more and more even in "serious" contexts, to help simplify and make messages attractive for users.

But this is of course not a question of either or - Information Competence as a trend will also continue to develop and will not be completely overridden by the Infotainment concept. Information competence concept can however benefit from Infotainment ideas: Information content can be made attractive and easy to understand by for example story telling and nice presentations that are combining different media for a funnier and more effective learning.

But in the end, in order to develop true knowledge and innovative solutions, persons need to walk on the thorny and narrow road, not just take the easy shortcuts of Infotainment. They need to hold information competence and they need information specialists to help them to develop this skill!

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