

"Stop Reading Stuff!" Information overload and media literacy

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Media Literacy is a boring phrase to describe an exciting issue. When we held a [debate](#) on it tempers became frayed, passions ran high and voice were raised in a way that is usually associated with hot political topics. Why?



Polis in the pub

It's because there are a lot of people out there who think that the new communications tools are revolutionising our lives in wonderful ways. There are also a lot of people who feel disturbed, excluded, threatened and even abused by the process. This is not the old Geek versus Dinosaur argument. This is a much more interesting debate about how human beings fit into media change.

Ben Hammersley from Wired UK fired everyone up by scolding the moaning minnies who complain about 'information overload'. "Stop reading stuff!" said Ben. You don't ban alcohol because of alcoholics, so learn to use media in moderation.

But David 'Information Is Beautiful' McCandless was much less sanguine. When he asked the audience on a show of hands, about half felt they were drowning in data, despite being a generally media-savvy, intelligent bunch of people.

David designs wonderful ways of visualising information but he thinks there is simply too much for us to take in. His key insight is that we should stop trying for universal comprehension:

"The really revolutionary thing is that information is becoming fluid. Where we could say for sure that we knew things, now we have constant uncertainty. Perhaps in the future, the mature response to this is to admit not knowing."

But will this new way of thinking about the world change us as human beings? Cynthia O'Murchu does investigative journalism and data visualisation at the FT, so she's no slouch on bringing brains and software together. But she questioned whether we will physically/neurologically be able to keep up with all this info-flow.

And even Matt Locke who brings mainstream broadcasting together with social media at Channel 4 raised a darker prospect. Will we look back in 50 years and wonder where it all went? It will be impossible to capture all this new media data, so will we lose our record of the world?

Certainly, some members of the audience were palpably angry about their personal experience of much social media. They feel their privacy has been abused, their lives taken over, their intelligence insulted. One person got a round of applause for declaring how she was finally living a Facebook-free life and how liberated she felt.

Another journalist pointed out the business model crisis in news. While someone else made the astute point that those who abuse their power may find it easier to hide in a world of data super-abundance. Lots of information does not inevitably lead to increased oversight.

However, a more positive vision did emerge. Cynthia believes that media literacy will evolve, although we need to invest in basic skills at an educational level.

Matt Locke said that those who add value to communications will thrive. The journalist can come to truth WITH the citizen. The world was always 'grey', it's just the old media who pretended we could see things in black and white. We will learn to love and deal with the new communication spaces.

Ben Hammersley asserted that 'most of the media you consume is produced by your mates' but that the consumption of high quality media is also increasing. Our social networks may be humming with trivia but we also buy the Economist, FT and other 'difficult' journalism in increasing volume.

As readers of this blog know, I share that optimism. On balance I welcome the incredible opportunities rather than fear the inevitable downsides. I am less content with what went before, so I welcome the chance for change.

However, I am concerned about the digital divide. Not just the crude technological/social economic divide. I think that is essentially a technical/political issue about investing in education and universal access. We should care about that, but it shouldn't stop us embracing new communications technologies.

No, I am more concerned about whether we have the curators to help shape these information flows and whether those people or organisations that do the filtering and connecting are informed by some kind of ethical value system. Data is not neutral. Information is beautiful but it is also political. Networks are powerful and so they also need to be transparent and accountable.

Step forward the networked journalist, your digital public sphere needs you.

[The panel discussion was sponsored by [MediaCSR Forum](#) which works on behalf of media companies to promote media literacy.]

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