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Early Modern Information Overload

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Abstract

Contemporary discussions of information overload have important precedents during the years 1550-1750. An examination of the early modern period in Europe, including work of humanism, science, theology, and popular encyclopedias demonstrates that perceptions of information overload have as much to do with the ways in which knowledge is represented as with any quantitative measures in the production of new texts, ideas, or facts. Key figures in this account include Francis Bacon, Conrad Gesner, Francesco Sacchini, Johann Heinrich Alsted, Caspar Bauhin, Rembert Dodoens, Samuel Bochart, Johann Jakob Scheuchzer, John Wilkins, Jonathan Swift, Ephraim Chambers, Samuel Johnson, Denis Diderot, and Louis-Sébastien Mercier.

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As long as the centuries continue to unfold, the number of books will grow continually, and one can predict that a time will come when it will be almost as difficult to learn anything from books as from the direct study of the whole universe. It will be almost as convenient to search for some bit of truth concealed in nature as it will be to find it hidden away in an immense multitude of bound volumes.

—Denis Diderot, “Encyclopédie” (1755)

The idea of “information overload” is deceptively familiar. Even if it were not for the crescendo of contemporary voices announcing this problem, there are few of us in academia who could not have supplied the concept on our own, that is, if we were able to find the time between keeping up with the latest scholarship in our field and ourselves producing it. But, as it happens, the work has already been done for us. The notion of information overload appears everywhere in our popular media as a characterization of something specific to and emblematic of our era, of life in a time of cell phones and web browsers and fax machines and innumerable other “information appliances.” Recently, a new term, “information fatigue syndrome,” was even coined to name a related psychological malady.¹

This is not to say that “information overload” has a purely negative connotation. It is the other half of a desire for immediate and total information access, and in discussions of contemporary culture, it is at least as common to hear expressions of ecstasy as of unease associated with the rush and flow of information. The unsteady balance between desire and anxiety in this realm so

¹The ubiquity of the idea may be measured by the number of self-help manuals now appearing on the subject and by the number of corporate studies aimed at solving the problem. See the studies collected (since 1994) by the news organization Reuters, including *Dying for Information* and *Glued to the Screen: An Investigation into Information Addiction Worldwide*.



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Early modern information overload, pitch accuracy, for example, rotates the beam.

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