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Online Information Overload -- and How to Cope

By **Susan J. Ellis**

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In the northern hemisphere, the month of September brings the start of a new school year. As I look at the displays of school supplies, I find myself thinking about how learning has evolved. Spiral notebooks, pens and pencils, backpacks, and more continue to entice students in an array of designs and colors, but for adults, the most important tool for life-long learning is the Internet. The trouble is that we are drowning in data. What does this mean for our own professional development and for volunteer involvement?

I am totally committed to the power of online information and exchange. We opened this Website in 1997, when doing so took a real leap of faith in the volunteer field, since most leaders of volunteers were still struggling to get their organizations to put a computer into their office at all. As Jayne Cravens notes, in the early days when we presented workshops about virtual volunteering, we started by asking "who in the room has an e-mail account?" Followed by "whose organization has a Website?" In 1997, we considered it great if a third of the people raised their hands; today the questions themselves sound quaint, if not weird.

Thirteen years is really not a huge amount of time, even if we did change centuries along the way. Yet consider the ever-increasing speed of technological evolution. We've seen:

- The availability of greater computing power, in smaller instruments, at less cost – smart phones, notebook (smaller than laptop) computers, etc.
- Texting and instant messaging provide real-time communication to anyone around the globe.
- The introduction of personal portable listening devices that have transformed the music industry and have led to podcasts of every description, recreational and professional.
- The advent of digital cameras has spawned seemingly endless ways to share our photographs and videos (e.g., flickr, YouTube).
- Online learning has left the old postal-mail distance learning approach in the dust.
- Blogging allows anyone to publish. The result is often useless or mundane musings, but also sites with a wealth of intelligent and insightful points of view. That's why, increasingly, news reporters are quoting blogs as their sources.

- VOIP (voice-over-Internet protocol) sites such as Skype permit global conversations, for *free*, including seeing one another by webcam.
- Social media has transformed the globe into an unending network of messages. Whether sites such as Facebook and Twitter irritate or entrance you, millions are communicating this way – and even, if we believe the proponents, micro-volunteering a few minutes at a time. (See what the Brits are doing right now to explore micro-volunteering.)
- The most recent issue of *Wired Magazine* is declaring "The Web is Dead. Long Live the Internet," as legions of smart phone users download "apps" of every description, enabling access to an unimaginable amount of data without needing a Web browser as an interface to the Internet.

OK. You've lived through all this, too. Why am I taking this trip down memory lane? Because I am overwhelmed. I can't keep up and I am one of those who really tries. Up to a few years ago I answered every e-mail within 48 hours. Today I'm lucky if I can *read* every e-mail I get in 48 hours. I have 47 separate folders in Outlook just for the e-newsletters I get regularly. And each of those links me to yet more wonderful information, which contains more links, *ad infinitum*. Of course, I confess that Energize also generates some of this electronic communication, always in the hope of being helpful yet realizing that we become part of the tsunami of more, more, more. Not to mention the challenge of separating the wheat from the chaff to find information of genuine value.

As you might suspect already, scientists are also studying the effect of "Your Brain on Computers." This problem affects us personally, all of our organization's employees and volunteers, and prospective volunteers as well.

I'm going to bet that most of you resonate with my words. And I thank you for choosing to read these very words when I know you had many other options for which site to visit right now. The question I pose to you is: *How do we cope?*

Some are calling for "digital detox" with small but significant actions such as reminding yourself to focus on one task at a time, taking regular off-line breaks, and unplugging periodically during the day so you can actually think deeply without chimes and rings calling you to new information.

We are luckier than most. We can tap the collective talents of volunteers to help tame and filter the data flood. For example:

- Don't have everything go to your personal e-mail box. Create specific addresses such as volinfo@, newvol@, volreports@ – whatever categories of e-mail need attention but can be delegated to volunteers willing and ready to respond on your behalf.
- Ask all volunteers if they have a special interest they would enjoy following online for you, or create a wish list indicating what you need someone to become informed about. Things like: micro-volunteering activities; aid to the Pakistani flood victims; how to develop a better podcast or blog; new sites where you can post volunteer opportunities; sources for in-kind donations; and anything else you need. Volunteers agree to spend at least 30 minutes a week

surfing the net for their assigned topic. At set intervals they report to you – orally to highlight key finds and with a written list of URLs worth visiting.

- Create a Web Searcher position (which I've referred to before as a Cyber Deputy) for every unit or department in your organization – and for any project you initiate. That volunteer is charged with searching the Web for anything useful to the work being planned: trends and data, sample programs in other places, things that can be used in training for the unit/project, etc.

The members of the Energize online volunteer management training program, *Everyone Ready*, constantly tell us "we can't find time" to view the materials. This problem holds for any type of professional development goal. I have only found one way to overcome it and that is: schedule your online learning time and put it in your appointment book. Hoping to "fit in" some Web reading on the fly in a super-busy day has little chance of working. But if you promise yourself to take even 30 minutes a week for online learning and write down the allocated time, you are much more likely to do it.

Even better: online learning *teams*. Once a month, schedule lunch with a few colleagues and use the meeting to pool your precious time. Assign topics in advance and let each person share what useful sites she or he found on that topic. Or all study something online and use the lunch to debrief and discuss it.

Collectively we must get a handle on this unending barrage of images and facts. Maybe the volunteer office can show the way to everyone else in the organization? What's *your* solution?

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Submitted 23 September 2010, Anonymously
I find it hilarious that the first response referred us to a website - another piece of information for us to handle. Was the irony intentional?

Submitted 17 September 2010 by Rob Jackson, Director of Development and Innovation, Volunteering England
I just read this excellent article in the Guardian Online newspaper here in the UK and thought I'd share it by way of a response to this Hot Topic.
http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/sep/13/charlie-brooker-google-instant

Submitted 15 September 2010 by Randy Tyler, Online Volunteering Program Developer, Winnipeg, Canada
With ever-evolving technologies enabling even easier content generation, digital noise is only going to increase. In my 15 years of extensive Internet use, I have a few observations (and suggestions therein) that may help manage this burgeoning digital noise phenomena:

- Recognition and Acceptance: Recognize and accept the Internet, and the content therein, is massive, changing, indigestible (in a lifetime) and without clearly defined road maps.
- Internet Use: set realistic time limits with accompanying goals and objectives for Internet use (whether searching or social networking)
- Digital Curators: pursue a manageable number of (trusted and referred) digital curators as sources of information (such as trusted Web sites, Blogs, RSS feeds and Twitter followers)
- Analysis and Syntheses: acquisition of skills and knowledge that allow one to separate digital noise (e.g., opinion, unscientific research methods) from facts, has never been more necessary.

Good luck!

Submitted 9 September 2010 by Lois Milne, CVA, Morton Plant Mease BayCare Health System, Clearwater, FL USA
Timely topic, I agree. Recently I put myself on a tech diet and am doing well. The resources on line etc. are wonderful and just like the menu at a restaurant I can select what I need. It gives me access to resources I would nnot otherwise have.

Submitted 5 September 2010 by Sue Hine, Wellington, New Zealand
A timely topic Susan. I have been all afternoon researching information and articles for a presentation tomorrow, and opened your Hot Topic as a diversion before shutting down the computer. You have just got me booted up again!

A few months ago I wrote a creative non-fiction piece about learning to use the computer, from the computer's point of view. The computer sighed and groaned because the student (me) was such a dummy, and was fixated on using pen and paper. Here's the last few lines:

"Nearly thirty years later I'm old and in my dotage. I've been superseded by new whizz-bang kids offering facilities and software that were never dreamed of in my day. Old folks like me get sent off to collection depots for re-cycling, but I have found a rest-home in my protege's basement garage. She calls me friend for what she has learned from me and I take pride in her competence. But the lesson I will take to my grave is that I am just a machine. I could teach people according to the model of my time, yet that is nothing compared to the human brain which goes on learning without ever being re-invented."

Now I shall go off for a healthy digital detox - a walk in the late afternoon sunshine of a beautiful Wellington day.

Submitted 2 September 2010 by H. Roberts, President, Blankie Depot, Keyport, NJ USA
Whether I'm at work, standing in line for coffee, catching up with friends, making a date with family or coordinating a volunteer activity - digital detox comes up. The latest water cooler convo. I think for many of us "of a certain generation" the detox wish arrives eventually and we get nostalgic for the

way things use to be. I'm old enough to remember Mitch Miller and modern enough to recognize my college age son was born in a digital diaper.

When paper still ruled the roost, piles of outgoing and incoming correspondence, spreadsheets, paper clips and sticky tabs littered my desk. Filing was my daily dilemma and catching up on telephone calls my nighttime routine. These days are gone and I'm going to really miss paper. Video killed the radio star and Kindle may kill sharing a beautiful book.

Back in 1981, I bought my first expensive clunker of a computer and taught myself how to switch from an electric, self-correcting typewriter to a keyboard then mouse navigator and devoured whatever basic software I could find. Ten years later, I found myself visiting the big, world-wide web! I spent hundreds of hours virtual. An embarrassing about of time. Learning, reading, sorting through. When email became available service in my area, I jumped onboard and realized I didn't have anyone (yet) to reach using it. I worked the "wonders of emailing" into every conversation I could hoping to entice a friend or two into a new expense that would rock their world. Most people thought I was enjoying a fad. "What do you need THAT for?" "I'll never trust email!" were common statements. Ha!

Some fad. Today my file cabinet only contains copies of the most important hard documents while 95.9% of my working life rests on disk, flash drive or virtual filing cabinet. I read through 250 emails of value to me every week and respond to half immediately. The landline is a dinosaur (I still pay for) and my mobile unit needs constant charging. Everything from wedding invites, birth announcements, family photos, work assignments, payroll, bill pay, shopping, school info, calling in sick, travel arrangements, AND my volunteer leadership life have gone digital. I've accepted this is the only way to keep plugged in. The irony comes when a friend spends a hour writing an email instead of calling me. I still call. I still use notecards and stamps to say thank you.

What once was a large pool of diehard non-tech users in my circle has recently exploded into the arms of Facebook friends, Twitter notes, blog hobbyists and web site owners. You Tube has forever changed how we view privacy. The words "new," "latest," and "upgrade" have a miniscule shelf life.

So, how do I feel about the information highway today? I take what I need from the best tools available and ignore the rest. I never forget its a tool. I refrain from mindless emails, I don't own a Facebook or Twitter account, I don't keep the cell phone on 24/7 anymore and I take email protcols seriously. I'm learning to say NO more often and haven't missed a beat. I'm still as plugged in as I need to be. Family, friends, volunteers, colleagues know when and where to find me and when I don't wish to be found :)

I do not believe in recruiting volunteers to handle my leadership issues or personal life. Everyone is overloaded. Volunteers are brought on to support clients, mission, day to day commitments in real time on a personal, non-digital way. Emails are utilized for org. announcements and quick notes only.

I am embracing recent studies supporting digital detox, rethinking the true effectiveness of multitasking and reexamining quality over quantity. I am paying close attention to online privacy regulations, cataloging of online information, marketeers who corrupt the value of online audiences, the selling of our personal information and the number of updates needed to keep my PC safe from harm.

I am expecting the eventual national announcement for a "Digital Detox Day."

Submitted 2 September 2010 by Andy Fryar, Director of OzVPM, Adelaide, Australia
Thanks as always for a great HT Susan. You are absolutely right, the only way to find time these days for professional development/reading etc is to schedule the time to do it. I know that when people talk to me about not having the time to do it, I challenge them with the question 'Do you have time NOT to do it?"

In relation to managing email, I've heard several examples now of large companies who now allocate specific times during the work day when email will be read and accessed. The rest of the time it stays off.

At the end of the day it is about time management, and remembering we don't HAVE to be a slave to the never ending 'ding' of another email arriving!

Submitted 1 September 2010 by Ruth Reko, Senior Volunteer Consultant, Lutheran Services in America, Chicago, IL USA
As one of the Searcher volunteers I feel frustrated when I find something really cool and my Director is too busy on her other umpteen searches to hear from me about the topic that she asked me to search in the first place. Your article is good as far as it goes on this "new" volunteer role but help us know what to do with the information we've now been overwhelmed with.

Susan Responds:
Thank you so much for posting your observation, Ruth. Getting the volunteer perspective is great. I advise that you print out this Hot Topic, your response, and my reply and use them as a discussion starter with your director. This should certainly get her attention (or show her only my original essay and protect yourself!). What you need to do together is plan how you will report and schedule when. I recommend developing a very simply form (online or on paper) for you to complete as you find things worth her attention. Use a grid so that the URL stands out, then the name of the site, then what you found so useful. Add anything else you think you want to report. Maybe every other week you submit the report to her, organizing the sites on the form from top priority down. However, at least once a month, set aside some time for the two of you to meet and talk about what you're finding – even if it means sitting next to your director at a computer and showing her. Of course, if you find something really worthwhile, agree that you may share your find right away. Hope this helps!

Submitted 1 September 2010 by Don Rhodes, Don Rhodes & Associates Limited, Omakau, Central Otagom, New Zealand
Excellent article, and a timely review of why information overload needs some answers. What makes it get even worse is that all the 'experts' out there especially in the fields of management and similar, are exhorting us to sign up to Facebook and Twitter and God-Knows-What-Else otherwise our businesses will fail miserably. The truth is, we need to tell them go find some new fad, and concentrate on the suggestions you put up. Well done. Cheers.

Submitted 1 September 2010 by Marty O'Dell, CVA, Goodwill Easter Seals Miami Valley, Dayton, Ohio USA
More is not always better. The internet, like everything else has to have boundaries in our life. Computers come with on/off switches for a reason, as do phones, ipods, and other electronic devices. Find some reliable sources of information subscribe to them and delete the others. If you receive the same data in ten different formats isn't it the same data. Be choosy about your time.