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Staying Afloat

Treading Water in a Sea of Data

In March 1997, *Wired* magazine, ever the zealous prophet of near-future consumer tech, breathlessly trumpeted the imminent death of the Internet browser and the rise of so-called "push media." In short, the idea was that the Web would expand beyond the confines of the browser, both to additional desktop applications and to a host of other devices: phones, televisions, appliances, and even wallpaper. Next, all of these devices would coordinate their information delivery, transforming the Web from a passive medium, in which users request information, to an active medium, in which information "pushes" itself toward users. This new medium, we learn, would not "wait for clicks": it's "always-on, mildly in-your-face" and will "bombard you with an intensity that invitational media never muster." Content, we are promised—or warned?—"will not hesitate to find you."

A decade later, some of these predictions have not come to pass: thankfully, our toasters don't yet deliver the latest political headlines. Yet in the most important ways, the *Wired* piece has proven accurate. Although the computer monitor is still the primary way by which we view the Web, other devices—BlackBerrys; iPhones; and big-screen, media-center televisions—also increasingly play a role. And the browser has not disappeared, but it has certainly evolved: rather than acting solely as a picture window through which to view static Web pages, it now also serves as a frame for an array of applications which sort, filter, and manipulate information for its users.

The purpose of these applications is to assist us in staying afloat as the vast tides of information continue to rise. The programs can be divided into two broad categories. First, there are programs for news and blog updates. Chief among these is a news reader, an application that uses an electronic syndication protocol known as RSS (Really Simple Syndication) to continuously collect and organize news stories and blog posts from the sources to which the user subscribes. The program pulls information from these sources and reformats it so that, instead of visiting a hundred websites, the user need only open the browser and skim the headlines it presents him, organized by category—politics, technology, arts and entertainment, economics, and so on. Additionally, other tools may feed constant updates, turning the side of the screen into a sort of ongoing, customized news scroll.

There are also programs designed to facilitate personal communications: e-mail applications; social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace; and Twitter (a "micro-blogging" system that lets users send and read very short messages via cell phones or websites). Add in chat applications, customized e-mail news alerts (essentially digital clipping services), newsletter

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subscriptions, and online calendars, and the result is a great welter of information demanding immediate attention. Intended to ease the work of wading through the information now available, these tools have instead yielded a different sort of informational deluge, pushing upon us so much information at such great speed that reading and communication have accelerated into hectic, frantic activities.

We have entered the age of push technologies. But the problem is that they turn out to be, well, pushy. The Web once seemed to be little more than a simple catalogue of linked, nonlinear information, neatly organized and searchable. But in just over a decade it has, for many users, shed any trace of its former stillness. Like most commercial developments, the movement is toward louder, brighter, and more overwhelming, as each application must work harder to engage the user's attention.

And what is the key selling point for this sort of media delivery? According to the authors of that 1997 *Wired* essay:

> Foremost is relief from boredom. Push media will penetrate environments that have, in the past, been media-free—work, school, church, the solitude of a country walk. Through cheap wireless technologies, push media are already colonizing the world's last quiet nooks and crannies.

Leaving aside the suggestion that church, school, and country walks are boring, the larger problem here is the conflation of *boredom* with *lack of stimulus*. The idea hinges on the notion that humans at rest are intrinsically lacking in some way, that a mind cannot be at peace with itself. Moreover, it inverts the long-settled relationship between humans and the information they collect. Thanks to these tools, information no longer merely responds to your requests. Instead, it chases you.

The greatest toll is exacted on habits of mind. A regular user of these tools is likely to grow accustomed to consuming information in tiny, disparate chunks, and even these tiny chunks are often further broken up. Reading in such an environment lends itself to perpetual distraction; there is always some new piece of information insistent on grabbing the user's attention. It becomes nearly impossible to finish, much less dwell on, a single thought.

The habits of mind this environment promotes do not recede when one leaves the screen behind. Just drawing on my own experience, I've found it increasingly difficult in recent years to read books; my eyes, trained by hours each day in front of screens, jump fitfully around the page, impatiently flicking downward as if in hopes of a notification popping up from the bottom of the page. It has become harder for me to follow lengthy arguments, and more difficult to memorize important details. As others have noted—Christine Rosen in the pages of this journal, for example, and Nicholas Carr in *The Atlantic*—our electronic tools have made distraction a way of life.

These changes should come as no great surprise. They are, in a sense,

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natural: the human mind is tremendously adaptable, able to reshape itself to match our situations. But in adapting, our minds take on the qualities of the tools they use. Scientific research has confirmed what everyday experience has shown to be obviously true: external inputs—soothing music, bright lights, and countless other environmental factors—can alter not just a person's moods but even his thought processes. Given this, it seems entirely reasonable to suppose that persistent exposure to an environment of agitation and distraction can have a transformative, and generally damaging, effect on the mind.

Indeed, there is a growing recognition that the modern Web's torrent of information can be deeply wearying. Technology workers—particularly the small number of full-time professional bloggers who spend much of each day swimming the riptide currents of the Web's heaviest information streams—seem particularly susceptible. The *New York Times* reported a few months ago that since cybermogul Michael Arrington began blogging, "he has gained 30 pounds...developed a severe sleeping disorder and turned his home into an office for him and four employees." Arrington reports that he receives more than one thousand e-mails a day, in addition to numerous messages through other services. His lifestyle is "not sustainable," he says: "At some point, I'll have a nervous breakdown and be admitted to the hospital, or something else will happen." A handful of bloggers, the *Times* article suggests, have been killed by the stress of their work—drowned in the information flood.

It's no wonder, then, that there is a small movement of tech-workers who have vowed to take a single day each week as a break from technology: no e-mail, no RSS, no phones, no computers. It's a Sabbath with the rest but without the reverence; the idea is to clear one's mind, to refresh, to unplug. This "Digital Day of Rest" represents an attempt at balance—an approach that avoids an outright rejection of information technology, but that recognizes the value of carving out time for psychic rejuvenation.

The informational rhythms of modernity sometimes lead people to forget that in addition to managing information, they must also manage themselves. The best of today's information-organizing technologies serve up an astonishing amount of news and other media; yet even as these devices insinuate themselves into everyday life and reshape how we understand the world, the fact remains that the most crucial tool for information management is one's own commonsense judgment. Increasingly, this means that the best way to manage the endless flow of information is, from time to time, to close the spigot.

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