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Lost in Digital Wonderland

Finding path in Global Knowledge Society

The author of the hugely successful book 'Asia Incredible' and the winner of Peter Drucker Challenge-2012, Siddharth Wadehra explores, in the spirit of the legendary Peter Drucker, how information obesity has led us to be lost in Digital Wonderland and suggests how individuals and companies can find their path in the Global Knowledge Society. The essay is a subtle take on how 'gorging' on information ceaselessly has led to where we are today, and the potential remedies of how one could find a path out of the Digital Wonderland. The work is a tribute to the legendary Peter Drucker as it imbibes his thought process.

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“The truly revolutionary impact of the Information Revolution is just beginning to be felt. But it is not “information” that fuels this impact... But the impact may be even greater on societies and politics and, above all, on the way we see the world and ourselves in it.”

- Peter F. Drucker (October 1999)

It’s hardly been a little over a decade that the legendary Peter Drucker penned these lines in his article ‘*Beyond the Information Revolution*’ in *The Atlantic* magazine in that we find ourselves completely lost in the world of digital information; trying hard to maneuver our way to find a credible path in the Global Knowledge Society. Even as most would deny it, we are in an era of information obesity and our unhealthy information consumption habits are affecting us and the organizations we work for adversely. The amount and the quality of digital data that technology has exposed us to is way beyond a sane human mind can absorb and process effectively.

Unhealthy information consumption often creates bad information habits for individuals and companies; exactly the way unhealthy eating creates food addictions. Statistics reveal to us that one is likely to spend a significant portion of his work day—sometime in excess of 11 hours a day consuming digital information: reading books on your kindle, checking out your friends’ Facebook pages, surfing the latest website makes waves on your i-Pad or maybe humming the tune along with your portable music player-- often one feels that he is often lost in this wonderland. Is he able to genuinely satiate his quest for knowledge and find meaningful answers to what he sought out to achieve; or he simply is overwhelmed with the sheer magnitude of the information a simple Google search can reveal that he is often tempted to switch screens to his Facebook newsfeed after a mere glance at the first few links which Google has to offer.

So the potent question is: How does one deal with the information overload or more aptly put; how does one find its path in the global knowledge society. The concept of information overload does not work; however, because as much as we’d like to equate our brains with iPods or storage disks, human beings are biological creatures and not mechanical ones. Our brains are finite in capacity as our expandable waistlines. While some might eat themselves into a cardiac stoke; not many are known to die of overconsumption. Nobody has ever heard anyone exploding due to overstepping their capacity; after eating the last bite of their evening snack. Like nobody has a maximum amount for fat storage; it is highly unlikely that we are individuals or companies have a maximum capacity for knowledge.

“To make knowledge productive, we will have to learn to see both forest and tree. We will have to learn to connect.”

— Peter F. Drucker

One may want to solve the problem mechanically—trying to deal with our relationship with information and knowledge as though we are digital machines. However instead of viewing the problem with the wrong lens in our hands: one of efficiency and productivity. Instead we should view the problem as we view almost everything else we biologically consume: *health*. Imagine if

individuals and companies started managing our information consumption like we managed our food consumption. The key point to note here is that both these worlds—the one of food and information consumption are not very different: the field of cognitive psychology tells us that information, like food, have psychological effects on our bodies, as well as considerable impact on our decision-making capabilities.

The parallel with what's happened to our food and what's happening to our information is nothing short of conspicuous. With food we have been witness to the fact that corporations that have driven the cost of a calorie down so that now obesity is more of a threat than famine. The same kind of efficiencies being drawn are transforming the information that we are often exposed to: produce and distribute information in a nearly free manner. Driven by a desire to boost profits; food giants figured out how to make appealing food really cheap: pack them with sugar, fat and salts to maintain that craving in people. Similarly internet companies did not take long to figure out that affirmation and sensationalism would sell over balanced information and they are doing a good job of telling people they are right instead of educating them about the truth. Just as a poor diet gives us a variety of diseases; poor information diet plagues us with ignorance—a form that does not come from the lack of information; but overconsumption of it; and sicknesses and delusions that don't affect the under informed; but the really well educated.

The solution: well, start formulating your own information diet—figure out what individuals and organizations would want to consume and what they would want to avoid, in this exciting era of information abundance. We need to realize that there is a choice involved. As much as the social media explosion and the mobile revolution we have us believe otherwise; our information consumption habits should shift towards a conscious selection rather than it being just a social consequence. The bad thing about information obesity is the fact that, unlike physical obesity which is evident to the naked eye, it is often difficult to tell whether or not someone is a poor victim of the same.

“What we call the Information Revolution is actually a Knowledge Revolution. What has made it possible to routinize processes is not machinery; the computer is only the trigger.”

- Peter F. Drucker (October 1999)

Obesity teaches us that we don't grow our food anymore; we manufacture it. With relatively homogenized and industrial production systems; toxins travel faster in our food supply and affect more people. While calories have become more affordable; the nutrients in our food have slowly disappeared only to be replaced with corn based sugar, soy based fat and protein and a whole lot of salt that have found their way on to our dinner tables. The consequences: a huge majority of the western world is considered to be obese today; it obviously is not a very appealing state of body and mind, more so when it is compounded by constant attempts to exercise and shift into power yoga. High tech gadgets- like the FitBit or Wii Fit have found their customers in the common man—all this only to ensure that he could continue eating. A new healthcare industry has sprung-up only to take care of people who consider a chocolate chip cookie, superior in

every way, to a head of lettuce. It would not be unfair to point mankind's biggest known threats—war, famine and pestilence have been replaced with heart disease complications. As human beings continue to evolve; cholesterol has replaced the cold of winter and famine deaths. Our relationship to food can take on social, political and environmental significance. It should just not be the right number of calories and the right interaction of nutritional elements but also be as natural as possible. It is not just good enough to eat reasonable portions of lean meat; the meat must come from cow that could roam free and eat natural grass.

Access to knowledge today has firmly changed due to technological advancements. A staggering over 5 billion people have access to the cell phone today—a constantly flowing digital cloud that encircles the planet. Anyone with a basic internet access has a wealth of knowledge at his disposal; so much so that smartphones are seen today as pocket sized libraries, printing presses, cameras, radios and televisions—almost everything that human beings can imagine, rolled into one in the palm of your hand. Critics and activists are worried that this information explosion is killing our attention spans and our general intelligence. However, it is highly unlikely that the creators of *Google* woke up with a conscious plan one morning to reconfigure our attention span or the management of *Facebook* is consciously trying to deteriorate the original thinking of its customers with its addictive news-feeds. Blaming a medium or its creators for altering our habits is like blaming food for making us fat. The digital elite often complain that they are unable to cope up with the news, email, status updates, tweets and the television shows they are compelled to watch—the bitter truth being that the information is not requiring one to consume it. There has always been, and will always be, more human knowledge and experience than any one human can absorb. It is not the total amount of information, but your information habits that are pushing you to an extreme which you find uncontrollable. Blatantly put, it's not the information overload that's the problem: its overconsumption.

"...the information revolution. Almost everybody is sure ...that it is proceeding with unprecedented speed; and ...that its effects will be more radical than anything that has gone before."

- Peter F. Drucker

"The way ahead" Economist.com (November 2001)

My friend Rohan, a product manager in the same firm we work in. The quality I admired most in Rohan was his ability to consistently lead a healthy lifestyle. Regular exercise and healthy eating was intricately woven into his lifestyle: someone who has had a complete disregard for sugar and carbohydrates. If he gets managed to get served a chocolate cream cookie as a side item for something he had ordered, the look on his face usually says it all. For Rohan, the cookie is never placed there to tempt him; for him it ghastly is there to kill him: an enemy waiting to throw his discipline and his rigorous exercise regime out of the window. But, does Rohan throw away the cookie? No. It is as if, he never really bothers him whether that piece of cookie is put on his plate

in the first place. Rohan usually keeps the cookie on his plate and continues his conversation with me, as if a contempt for the pile of empty sugar.

Similarly, in digital wonderland, there are thousands of cookies waiting to be eaten. It really is up-to us whether to give into the temptation or to stare at it with contempt. The result of going on a healthy information diet is the only way one can find path in the global knowledge society and emerge smiling out of the vast expanse of the digital wonderland. One would have more time to do things one enjoys awe can really implement this in reality; we need to understand that fasting is not dieting. Although it is good to take an internet vacation once in a while or maybe go on a social-media sabbatical; the root cause of the problem, our own bad habits, would need to be fixed. Any nutritionist would tell you that diet isn't about not eating—it's vastly about changing your consumption habits; not consuming less, but consuming correctly. Difficult as it may sound; if our brains, over time, have been rewired by poor information consumption habits; then we can also rewire our brains with health information-consumption habits.

Consider veganism: widely considered organic and healthy food. Although some would consider the statement extreme, it primarily symbolizes a belief, that animals, like all other living creatures, deserve basic moral consideration. Consuming meat has varied implications from animal cruelty to high carbon consumption. This stance of a vegetarian could well be replicated in digital wonderland—the fact that we should respect the content providers to continually provide us with good info-nutrients by sticking to only those providers and avoiding everything else. The thought requires careful planning and conscious consumption. Like a vegan who emerges victorious out of situations where he has to maintain his diet and often learns how to cook healthy vegan recipes; finding your path in a global knowledge society entails mastering data literacy—knowing where to get insightful data; how to effectively put it to good use with the use of appropriate tools. This also means that in-case you are consuming processed information; you continually check it for all its ingredients. Implying that, for the latest release of your favorite *Google* gadget; you need to closely examine its specs on the official *Google* website or their blog and not just look at what *Techcrunch* or *Mashable* or what any of the other websites have to opine.

“Knowledge has to be improved, challenged, and increased constantly, or it vanishes”

— Peter F. Drucker

Mankind's concept of literacy has changed whenever there is a major shift in information technology. The problem, today, is not the wide-spread inability to read or write but the ocean of digital data that we wade-in almost every single day. A new skill—one which would help us sort and filter data is necessary for us to be able to find path in the global knowledge society. The internet is not only the best way to fill your mind with nonsense; but it is also the best possible resource to help you get to the source-level information. Digital literacy, would therefore, comprise of your ability to filter your search coupled with your ability to process and synthesize the raw-data in the context you desire. For example not a majority of us actually use Google's

advanced search techniques—to search through news, blogs, discussions and social networks and filter them by date, time or source or just how many of use Google Scholar—the repository scientific papers, patents and laws to help us inch closer to the facts. And not to belittle the fact that significant chunk of information lies outside the confines of our favorite search engines. Search will not help if we cannot find the most reliable or accurate sources of information or if we are unable to draw accurate conclusions from the data we have found. Also, content creation and digital expression through blogs are a critical part of our literacy because it helps us to understand better what we say through the critique we receive from peers who read it. The final step of digital literacy, after retrieving information, filtering and publishing it, would be synthesis—the ability to merge what others opine about your ideas and concepts into your own thought-process to further enhance and improve them. Needless to say acquiring digital literacy needs constant refinement and practice to hone and develop.

The information culture has been adjusted such that the information is expected to be free to the consumer. But, this free information comes at a much higher cost: advertisement. A healthy information diet should contain few advertisements as possible. The economics of an advertising based media make it so that our content producers must draw eyeballs in every piece of content; which often leads to sensationalism, which tends to degrade its quality. That's not the only cost though: because advertising persuades us to buy things that we wouldn't ordinarily buy, the cost of consuming ad-sponsored model is higher than we think. Part of healthy information diet is respect for good content and as a policy we ought to reward honest, nutritious content providers with the financial compensation they deserve. Notably, most of us are not paying members of popular websites like: *ConsumerReports.org* or *National Geographic* and shell out cash for ad-free high-quality content.

Part of the reason people have poor food diets is that the food that is cheap often tends to be the worst for us. There is a strong relationship between poverty and obesity and it is no surprise that our poorest countries are often our most obese. Driven by the public concern for obesity and to lead a healthy life, the end consumers, today, are aware of this which has prompted Walmart to significantly cut salt, fat and sugar from their offering, making them the single largest provider of local organic food to the market. The result: the entire industry is changing and following suit so that foods can be sold in Walmart stores. Similarly if we begin to demand an end to factory-farmed content, and instead demonstrate a willingness to pay for more content like investigative journalism and strong, independent public press, we would eventually force the market to follow our lead as we find our way out of the digital wonderland.

Humans have evolved as information consumption geeks. We evolved from a world where information was critical for our survival. But, it's not the same today—information is abundant and more importantly it is cheap. If we have to truly find path in a global knowledge society out of the digital wonderland into enlightenment; we have to break the insidious cycle that ordinary people create with our demand; and the internet companies create with never-ending supply. Finding your path in the global knowledge eventually boils down to building a healthy

information diet by knowing what works best for you and creating a routine that you could eventually stick to. The only way, we are going to find path in the global knowledge society is to change the economics of information. And while it is not going to solve itself overnight, the fact being that with enough demand from the end consumer it will eventually begin to change: exactly the way the healthy food industry has shaped up. That's the only how we would successfully be able to find our way out of the digital wonderland and an accomplished path in the global knowledge society.

(2911 words)



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Siddharth Wadehra, an author and entrepreneur has been the winner of numerous business innovation awards around the globe. A Computer Engineer by education, not only has Siddharth has worked on numerous software applications for which he holds patents/copyrights but also presented papers in different forums on a range of technical topics. Siddharth has close to four years of credible work experience with Silicon Valley giants Sun Microsystems (now Oracle) and IBM before studying business at the Asian Institute of Management, Manila where he has participated and won in numerous business plan competitions- including a podium finish at the regional finals of the Hult Global Case Challenge-2012 at San Francisco. He is also the

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Presently, an Innovations Manager with Globe Telecom, Siddharth has also been invited as a guest speaker at in numerous renowned conferences across business schools in Asia and Europe including IESE Spain's Doing Good Doing Well conference—a forum on responsible business organizations. Siddharth has been a technology buff, sports enthusiast and an avid quizzer. He enjoys studying Business Laws and has industry knowledge on Cyber Laws and E-Commerce Laws. Siddharth has been the author of the book 'Asia Incredible' which discusses the changing business landscape in Asia, the opportunities which the huge Asian markets pose and urges youngsters and aspiring MBA's to take up to entrepreneurship rather than trading the conventional path. He is coming out with his next book on entrepreneurship 'Methods to Madness' later this year.