



Dealing with too much

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 October 2017
Accepted 10 October 2017
Available online 26 October 2017

Keywords:

Making choices
Information glut
Overload
Stress
Loneliness

ABSTRACT

In the paper, I address three issues that were often missing in the discussion of overflow: (1) A large quantity (of objects, information, etc.) is a condition that is necessary, but not sufficient for feeling overwhelmed; (2) Dealing with a large amount of incoming information is easier if we use subjectively unquestionable (because shared with other people) criteria; (3) The length of exposure to overflow of information. I present the results of analyses that support the role of motivation and shared values in feeling overwhelmed. I also discuss the individual differences in dealing with overflow, as some of us cope with “too much” better than others.

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In their seminal text “The Inherited Theories of Overflow and Their Challengers.

Löfgren and Czarniawska (2012) addressed important issues that are worth recalling: (1) Many of us feel such large quantities of information, choice, responsibility, and social relations create in us a sense of having not enough organizational skills and memory capacity to control information FLOW; too little knowledge to make the right choices; too little competence to manage responsibility; and too little time to maintain relations. (2) Overflow (described in colloquial terms as “simply too much”) can have different forms, contents, and meanings (both negative and positive, such as an opportunity connected with a desire to acquire more). (3) Overflows are often related to consumption but they do not have to be consumed: they can just as easily be spilled, lost, and ignored, or remain unseen, undetected, and unregistered.

In psychology flow is described as a state of “optimal experience” during a performed activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). Experiencing the flow means that we feel totally involved in what we are doing at a given moment—and that we are doing it with optimal effectiveness and enjoyment.

Alternatively the term flow can be described by using the Yerkes–Dodson law (1908/2004), which defines an inverted U-shaped relationship between the level of performance and the level of arousal (resulting from the level of motivation to excel). For every task we can define the optimal level of motivation with the highest

chance for success (other things being equal). The optimal level of motivation is higher for simple, almost automatic actions, such as running or digging, and lower for intellectually demanding tasks, such as solving mathematical problems or playing chess.

Both too low and too high levels of motivation to succeed are detrimental, whereas the optimal level of motivation can create the optimal level of experience. Analogically, we can talk about the optimal amount of information. When the flow of information is weak (which can be described as underflow) we can be bored and lack enough information to make the right decision. When the flow of information is very strong (which is described as overflow) we can face problems with information processing, and experience a reduction in decision quality and overall performance (Hanoch & Vitouch, 2004).

The papers collected in this special issue of the *EMJ* tackle a wide, transdisciplinary range of approaches to studying overflows. They also overlap with topics discussed a year ago at an international conference, *How People and Organizations Deal with Daily Overflows*, organized by the Faculty of Management, University of Warsaw.

The first group of authors deal with the more objective side of the issue: the problem of an increasing number of immigrants/skills in the Swedish labour market, wild animals in Australia, humans on the globe, etc. The second group of authors focus on how humans feel about the excess of people, goods, and information. Here the difficulty in dealing with “excess” means the difficulty with sense-making (Marody, 2015). Experience of overflow in the domain of the number of people we meet is linked with the lack of obvious standards allowing an easy identification of “who is

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who.” It is difficult to guess whether a guy in a plain t-shirt we met in the café was a businessman, who could be our future employer, or an unemployed waiter, who will need to be financially supported. The experience of overflow in the domain of things is linked to the fact that nowadays we cannot be sure how our choices in the sphere of consumption will be interpreted by others.

Being a managerial psychologist my attention was focused on the papers dealing with the problem of information overflow and I noticed that—from my point of view—three issues were missing.

First, a large quantity (of objects, information, etc.) is a necessary condition but not sufficient for feeling overwhelmed. The necessary condition for experiencing the feeling of being overwhelmed by information is the existence of a motivation to process the incoming information, assign it meaning, and organize it. Participation in a lecture on matrix algebra would be intellectually taxing for students who are preparing to take the exam, but not for a little child who happens to sit in the same room. Similarly, a tourist would not be as intellectually overwhelmed in an academic library as a researcher searching for literature relevant to his or her current topic of study. Thus it is the combination of the motivation to process relevant information and the abundance of that information in the environment that gives rise to the feeling of being overwhelmed.

Second, dealing with a large amount of incoming information is easier if the criteria for processing and organizing it are obvious to us. Making choices is easy when we use subjectively unquestionable (i.e., obvious) criteria. As Mira Marody (2015) showed in her book, this subjectively unquestionable status has criteria we share with others. We live in a world of choice (Schwartz, 2004/2016), which includes choice of ideology and beliefs. We can (even) choose a religion (e.g., whether to become an Atheist, Catholic, or Buddhist), an ideology (e.g., whether to follow welfare capitalism, alter-globalism, or feminism), or a country, etc. Unfortunately our individually chosen values will not help us if our social group does not share them. It is very hard to be the only Catholic, alter-globalist, or feng shui believer in a family. If our friends do not share our choices, we tend to feel alienated. If we are surrounded by a group who share our values, then our criteria of choice have the subjectively unquestionable ‘obvious’ status (in Polish: status ‘oczywistości’).

Both hypotheses, stating the role of motivation and shared values, were tested on 896 participants² selected from an Internet panel. The feeling of overflow was measured with a scale consisting of three items e.g., I feel overwhelmed by the amount of information around me (from the Internet, telephone, and friends). Details of the analyses and data set can be requested from the author—here I will present the conclusions only.

If the hypothesis that motivation is a necessary condition for experiencing being overwhelmed by information is true, we expect that people who are more educated experience overflow more often than those less educated. Therefore, we can claim that better educated respondents live in more cognitively demanding environments, but at the same time they are equipped with better cognitive tools for processing information. They should also have a stronger motivation for “sense-making.”

If the hypothesis that socially shared criteria reduce the feeling of being overwhelmed is true, then people who feel lonely should experience overflow more often. We can claim that the subjective feeling of loneliness is heightened when our friends, colleagues, or family do not share our values. Lack of social validation of our evaluation criteria means lack of subjective unquestionable status,

so choices demand more effortful and difficult processing and organization, which can lead to overflow. Loneliness was measured with the 4-item version of the UCLA Loneliness scale (Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980) and included questions such as “How often do you feel that you lack companionship?” A multiple regression analysis was performed for the sample of 896 participants after controlling for age and gender (which turned out to be unrelated to overflow) and showed that higher levels of overflow were connected with: (1) higher levels of education, and (2) feeling lonely. In short, large quantities of objects, information, etc. cause overflow only if we are motivated to do something with the objects or process the information. Successfully dealing with overflow needs clarity of evaluation criteria, which have subjectively unquestionable status only if they are socially shared. In business the obvious and socially shared criterion is to maximize profit. So, as we learned during a Business Ideas Exchange Forum,³ the problem of overflow bothers scientists much more than businessmen.

In social sciences, where exhaustive coverage of all-important sources is necessary and criteria for meaningfulness are vague, overflow of publications creates “a noisy, cluttered environment which makes meaningful research difficult, as different voices compete to capture the limelight even briefly” (Alvesson, Gabriel, & Paulsen, 2017). Billig (2013) highlighted this clearly in the following:

- In a competitive environment, which encourages researchers to promote the products of their work: the words, the phrases they produce, rewarded are not those who write when they have something to say, and who put a lot of effort into preparing the clear text, but those who write and publish massively.
- Most scholars write not in pure vocation, or in search of the truth but from professional and institutional obligation.

Third, the final missing point in the collection of papers is lack of attention to the role of time: the length of exposure to overflow of information. Our brains have built-in mechanisms, such as habituation, that provide protection from overflows. For example, the first days in Beijing are overwhelming, but with the passage of time the brain cuts out perceptions of irrelevant stimuli (Wiczorkowska, Król, Wierziński, 2016).

The psychologically focused papers in this special issue address the problem of the limitations of the working memory. Namely, we cannot process too much information at the same time and, even with a very effective working memory, organization of the input still plays a crucial role. A sequence of numbers, 1709195150319802012198225121925, can be easily memorized if discovered that it constitutes the birth dates of family members. However, it must be remembered that long-term memory (LTM) has no limitations, but collecting information is meaningful only if we are able to use it. Furthermore, there is the problem of too much information stored in LTM and the diminishing potential for creativity. This was underlined by Albert Einstein who was supposed to have said that “Reading, after a certain age, diverts the mind too much from its creative pursuits. Any man who reads too much and uses his own brain too little falls into lazy habits of thinking.”

It is also worth noting the individual differences in dealing with overflow as some of us cope with “too much” better than others. For example, in socialism, the economy of scarcity made it easier to accept less attractive options; therefore, interval strategists, who by default are easy to accept, coped better in such environments (Wiczorkowska, 2011; Wiczorkowska & Burnstein, 1999). By

² Forty-nine per cent of men aged from 21 to 70 years ($M = 37.1$, $SD = 13.1$), with length of education from 8 to 17 years ($M = 13.8$, $SD = 2.57$).

³ A panel bringing together business and science at the “Managing Overflows” conference that took place in Warsaw, 2016.

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