Abstract

Title: Everything All of the Time: A Study of Hyperlinks and Information Overload

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The term 'information overload' is often used to describe the feeling of being completely overwhelmed with information, and is often attributed to the tendency for certain forms of media to overstimulate the user. In light of recent discussions surrounding the cognitive effects of Internet use, this study will attempt its own investigation into the potential connection between 'information overload' and hyperlinks, the mechanisms that allow for the Internet's non-linear structure.

It will do this by first getting up to speed with past and present arguments, and will then use these arguments to inform an empirical analysis of its own. This analysis will involve three parts: a reading task, a questionnaire and an examination of articles from newspapers, magazines and blogs that give a more personal flavour to the topic of hypertext-induced 'information overload'. This three-phased approach ties together data gathered from the distinct experimental methods, attempting to show that the difference in cognitive load levels between the control and test groups in the reading task is linked to the subjective descriptions of 'information overload' provided by participants and by anecdotal literature.

The study concludes that while the presence of hyperlinks increases cognitive load, its connection with 'information overload' is still tenuous, and that because 'information overload' is qualitative in nature, the degree to which it affects online media consumers has a potential for variation that this research cannot fully account for. However, it does show that a majority of participants confirmed having experiences of 'information overload', and this combined with the results from the reading task, as well as the analysis of the anecdotal literature, provides at least some evidence that the current organisation of information on the Web is not suited to our cognitive faculties.