

How to Stay Grounded in the Age of Information Overload

Written by Daniel Clausen

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DANIEL CLAUSEN, APR 30 2017

Information abounds, yet knowledge – to say nothing of wisdom – remains scarce. This was true in earlier times before media saturation, fake news, alternative facts, and the other myriad characters of our new information age. Lately, the prospects seem even dimmer.

In his fantastic article, “Ennui Becomes Us”, Randall Schweller lays out a dystopic vision of our current information environment.

Consider the effects of the new “million-channel media universe.” Talk radio, cable television and the Internet (YouTube and the blogosphere) offer so many contradictory “facts,” “truths” and “informed opinions” that people everywhere can essentially select and interpret facts in a way that accords with their own personal, idiosyncratic and often flat-wrong versions of reality.

How do we push back against this information anarchy?

The tools of the social sciences offer some answers. Rigorous training in the philosophy of science, in methods, and in how and when to make inferences can be important correctives to the pulls of media sensationalism and “true enough” facts and punditry. However, there seem other important rules of thumb we can abide by and that we can pass on to our students and others outside the discipline. These rules might help us not only be more knowledgeable but may also help us reach the ultimate goal of wisdom.

Take a Break from Social Media. I find it helpful to spend more time thinking and less time absorbing information. I often take long breaks away from social media. For someone like me, born in an age when people still looked up information in phone books, these social media fasts might be easy enough. For millennials, they will require incredible discipline.

Avoid the “Cult of Now.” It might also be helpful to look at big historical trends instead of focusing on the day-to-day of issues. Whenever I look at a particular topic, I try to ask, “Is there a larger historical narrative at work here?” As far as newspapers go, I think it’s also important to be judicious in what we read. One rule of thumb we can follow is to try to read only newspaper articles that challenge long-held beliefs. In other words, try to use current news to falsify ideas rather than confirm biases.

Encourage Others to Become “Epistocrats.” The idea of an “epistocrat” is one I borrow from Nassim Nicholas Taleb. To be an epistocrat is to challenge the foundations of your truth claims, to challenge how and when you know something, and to try to actively falsify one’s own beliefs.

Travel. One should travel to other intellectual bubbles as long as they are free of bigots, extremists, and conspiracy theorists. Other disciplines, other traditions, long-forgotten books, folk wisdom — great insights can be found everywhere. Even the above-mentioned barbaric landscapes of bigots, extremists, and conspiracy theorists are tolerable as long as one remains a tourist and does not intend to take up permanent residence.

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In another sense, one should also literally *travel*. If you go someplace new and see something unique and try to understand a new culture, it's difficult to become encapsulated in any one sensationalist-media bubble.

Avoid the arrogant idiot. There is something in our genes that makes us prone to follow those who exude self-confidence. The problem is that these people make terrible epistocrats. Studies have shown that they tend to rate their knowledge on a subject higher than others, even when they know almost nothing about a subject (see David Dunning's article here for a summary of the research). In my own experience, real knowledge tends to breed skepticism and modesty. The arrogant idiots of the world tend to be loud, sensational, and generally more aggressive in their marketing — so avoiding them and their toxic messages can be difficult. Nevertheless, you ought to try.

Look for beautiful and benevolent outsiders. This one is a selfish conceit. I consider myself a benevolent outsider (While my mother has assured me that my beauty is beyond reproach, the epistocrat in me doubts whether this is sufficient evidence). I often wonder why people don't seek me out instead of relying on the arrogant idiots of the world. I'm not loud and I don't publish often, so you *do* need to seek me out and people like me. We're hard to find, but not *that* hard to find.

If you're a beautiful and benevolent outsider, speak up! Publish a little bit more. Especially in the age of information overload, your services are desperately needed. The epistocrats of the world are looking for you.

About the author:

Daniel Clausen is a full-time special lecturer at Nagasaki University of Foreign Studies. His research has been published in *Asian Politics and Policy*, *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies*, and *East Asia Forum*, among other publications. His teaching experience includes over seven years of experience as a TESOL instructor. He has also written several novels and short story collections. You can learn more about his work on his Amazon page here or on his Goodreads page here.