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Book summary: The Information Diet

This is the first part of my summary of "[The Information Diet](#)" by Clay Johnson, which I got through the O'Reilly Reader Reviews program. The book is about the information we consume, and by drawing parallels to food diets, come up with ways to be consume information in a more conscious and healthier way. The book is very focused on American politics, but can be applied to other topics.

Introduction

As we're hard wired to love salt, sugars, and fats, we're also hard wired to love affirmation and the confirmation of our beliefs. Food companies learned to sell a lot of cheap calories, by packing them with salt, fat, and sugar. And media companies learned that affirmation sells a lot better than information. Driven by profits, they produce information as cheaply as possible. As a result, they provide affirmation and sensationalism over balanced information.

When viewed through the health lens, the information abundance problem appears to be a matter of health and survival. The first step is realizing that there is a choice involved.

The media is using technology to figure out what it is that people want, and finding the fastest way to give it to them. Eg. Huffington Post shows two headlines during the first 5 minutes and keeps the one that got more clicks, and AOL's policy says that each editor should use four factors to decide what to cover: traffic potential, revenue potential, turn-around time, and lastly, editorial quality. All editorial content staff are expected to write 5 to 10 stories per day.

"Information obesity" is what makes people not know basic facts or believe falsehoods. This doesn't stem from a lack of information, but from a new kind of ignorance that results in the selection and consumption of information that is demonstrably wrong. We don't trust "the news" but we do trust "our news". Tobacco companies have figured out that "Doubt is our product since it is the best means of competing with the 'body of fact' that exists in the mind of the general public". Information obesity has three flavors:

- Agnotology: manufactured ignorance and culturally induced doubt, particularly through the production of seemingly factual data. The

more *informed* someone is, the more *hardened* their beliefs become, whether or not they're right.

- Epistemic closure: dismissal of any information that doesn't come from a network of interconnected and cross promoting media because it comes from "the other side", and is therefore ipso facto not to be trusted (how do you know they're liberal? Well, they disagree with the conservative media!).
- Filter failure: The friends we choose and the places we go all give us a new kind of bubble within which to consume information.

The Information Diet

First of all: fasting is not dieting. It's good to disconnect, but unplugging is just a way to avoid our bad habits. Second: the diet is based on the author's experience, and is *not* backed by science. Third: it's a list of recommendations, and every person has to find what works for them. Summary: **Consume deliberately. Information over affirmation.**

The author coins the term *infovegan*, a person that consumes consciously. This requires knowing where to get appropriate data and what to do with it. Check the ingredients of "processed information" (when reading news on a new medicare proposal, take a look at the bill itself). It's also a moral choice: opting out of a system that's at least morally questionable, shunning factory farmed information, politically charged affirmations, and choosing to support organizations providing information consumers with source-level information and containing more truth than point-of-view.

Data Literacy

Our concept of literacy changes with every major IT shift. Now, filtering and sorting through all the available information is very valuable. Proposal for a modern data literacy:

1. Know how to search: not just Google and Bing, but specific engines for patents, scientific papers, laws, budgets (eg. USASpending.gov), etc.
2. Know how to filter and process: need to find the most reliable and accurate information sources, and learn how to process them with tools like spreadsheets, or else we're unable to draw accurate conclusions.
3. Know how to produce: knowing how to publish information (text, audio or video) and the ability to take feedback are both critical skills.
4. Know how to synthesize: we must be able to synthesize the ideas and concepts of others back into our ideas.

The Diet

First of all, figure out how much information you're consuming daily (the average is 11 hours). A long-term goal could be to reduce that to 6, turning the rest into information production, social time with friends, exercising, etc. Things to avoid:

- **Mass affirmation:** avoid the suppliers that make a living telling you how right you are. Eg. no more than 30 minutes a day of mass affirmation. For liberals, that'd mean choosing between Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart.
- **Overprocessed information:** consume locally or try to remove distance to the things that you investigate.
- **Advertisements:** the economics of advertisement-based media results in sensationalism. We have to reward our honest, nutritious content providers with financial success.
- **Our own fanaticism:** keep an eye on your own fanaticism and challenge your beliefs. Keep a list of stuff you find to be absolute, like firm positions and values, and look to find data and people that challenge your biases, prescribing yourself enough time to encounter them.

Social Obesity

The only way we can solve the problem of information obesity is to change the economics of information (the information that is the worst for us is the easiest/cheapest to obtain), because they have changed in a way that not only stupid people are getting duped anymore. We need to demand an end to factory-farmed content, and demonstrate a willingness to pay for content like investigative journalism and a strong, independent public press.

Ideas: share this book; organize in [infogroups](#); focus and be civil, keeping focus on the goal of improving digital literacy; meet face to face; learn, eg. from the reports by [Knight Commission](#); act, producing useful outcomes in your local communities, including children.

Participation gap

The participation gap is the gap between people and the mechanics of power in their governments. Its cause is our desire to focus on large, emotionally resonant issues over practical problems that can be solved. Related to this is the "sportsification" of politics, which makes us treat elections like athletic rivalries, vilifying the other team at the expense of doing what's right.

The first cause is scale: the underlying structures of government aren't designed to handle our present

population. Transparency is overrated as solution to this, plus it has disadvantages like allowing dishonest people to appear honest. Two big lessons about this: (1) there's a gigantic gap between the skills to win an election and the skills to govern a country, and (2) many of the nonprofits and advocacy groups are more interested in staying relevant than solving problems (as a result, these advocacy groups tend to focus on larger problems that can go unsolved for years; also, after working for one such group, the author assures that online petitions are not meant, primarily, to cause change, but to get your email address so that you can later be bombarded by emails asking for money).

Start sweating the small stuff at the expense of some of the big stuff. If you're interested in making government more accountable, work on making it so that the government's listening tools and policies are modernized. Every issue has hundreds of small, nonpolitical, operational problems. Fixing these can have a huge impact compared to combating a vague foreverwar.

Special note: Dear Programmer

Programmers: take your role in society seriously. Dedicate some portion of your time to issues you care about. You needn't ask for permission to do this, or wait for a nonprofit or advocacy group to ask you donate your time (and while it's useful to partner with organizations, it's likely that they're more interested in your skills to help them fundraise than they are to solve problems). This isn't a call for you to build apps for your favourite nonprofit, because unless you're willing to support and maintain each application, and help constantly ensure its usage and adoption, you're wasting your time.

And this is it. As for my review of the book, I got to say I was a bit disappointed by it. It was much more focused on American politics than I expected, which sometimes made it hard to relate to. There are definitely many interesting parts in this book, and a fair amount of food for thought, but some of the advice feels pretty demanding: it feels like it's enough to keep certain things in mind and make certain changes without really measuring everything objectively (I have the impression that the author has a much bigger faith than me in numbers, measurement and "objectivity"). In summary, good book, but not as universal or life-changing for me as I had hoped.