

Overinformed: Confessions of an information junkie

by [Mark U. Edwards](#) in the [November 1, 2000](#) issue

In *Data Smog: Surviving the Information Glut* (1997) David Shenk tells of “technostress” researcher Philip Nicholson’s practice of asking his audiences, “Pretend that you were forced to make a choice between giving up one of your fingers and giving up use of your computer for the rest of your life. Which would you choose?” Nicholson reports that one-third of the people surveyed chose to give up a finger.

I am an information junkie. Every work day I receive five to ten e-mails to keep me informed. From www.nytimes.com I receive capsule summaries of the newspaper’s daily front-page news and links to other articles. From www.slate.com comes a summary of the day’s news from the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today*. The same e-mail often includes a digest of the leading international press.

Today in Slate sends me the electronic journal’s large table of contents. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* (<http://chronicle.com>) summarizes news of interest to college administrators, faculty and scholarly types. *Business Week* (www.businessweek.com) briefs me on business news. Ziff-Davis, the computer magazine publisher, updates me about high-tech matters (www.zdnet.com).

Once or twice a week I receive “Sightings,” a sprightly essay about religion and public life from the University of Chicago’s Martin E. Marty Center (to inquire, send e-mail to rjmoore@midway.uchicago.edu, with “Sightings” in the subject line). Once or twice a week I receive *Woody’s Windows Watch* (to join, send an email to: www@woodyswatch.com) or *Woody’s Office Watch* (www.woodyswatch.com/wow/) to keep me abreast of the latest news about features and bugs in Windows and Microsoft Office.

I am only about five months, or 200 bugs, behind in reading these well-done alerts. And, of course, I receive one or two additional “info-alerts” each day from sites that

mail only occasionally.

Oh yes, I just subscribed to the weekly poll results from the Gallup organization (www.gallup.com). Each of these digests includes multiple links to the full articles. One click, and I can explore the matter in depth.

If I'm hungry for more, I can tank up at the amazing and invaluable *Arts & Letters Daily* site (www.cybereditions.com/aldaily/), which maintains links to 17 newspapers (including two Australian dailies, the leading British, Canadian and Irish papers, and the *Jerusalem Post*), 11 news services (from ABC through BBC to UPI), at least 56 magazines of news and culture, 22 quality sources of book reviews, 26 columnists (mostly American), 12 E-zines (electronic magazines) and, finally, links to utilities, grammar, dictionary, encyclopedia, "amusements" and "recommended" sites.

Arts & Letters Daily updates every day its capsule lead-ins to dozens and dozens of articles and op-ed pieces from a wide variety of sources. Unless you read faster than a star Evelyn Wood student, you can spend hours at this site and still end your visit feeling "info-guilt," a gut-wrenching conviction that you are a slacker in today's information revolution.

But there is more, much more! Whatever *Arts & Letters Daily* may have missed from the mainline press, you are likely to find at *Slate's* link page (www.slate.msn.com/PunditCentral/punditlinks.asp). Offering extensive links to international papers as well as to art, theater, movie, music, book and television critics, the *Slate* site is the place to go for editorial links, gossip and even transcripts and audio files of the TV pundits who go after each other every weekend.

I haven't even mentioned listening to *Morning Edition* while I shower (www.npr.org, if I miss the broadcast), or viewing the *Jim Lehrer News Hour* on the rare evenings when I'm at home (also online at www.pbs.org/news hour).

Can I or anyone handle this much information? Do I or anyone need this much information? David Shenk makes a powerful case that human beings cannot happily handle the amount of information now available. I agree. But the remedy is not disengagement but more active, prudent and intelligent engagement.

Once the e-mails and sites have concentrated the information from the leading sources of news and opinion, I need to do what only I, the human, can do—recognize what I am seeking when I see it, evaluate its content and cogency and decide

whether to pursue the information further. I, not some software program, must play the role of the “intelligent agent.” And I must rely on my developed prudence—one of the practical virtues based on reason and experience—to help me at my task. Getting five months behind on bug reports for Windows and Microsoft Office may be the most prudent thing to do.

Now let me think . . . would I get to choose which finger?