

Information Age? Wrong

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Tell me if you do this: start walking somewhere, take out the smartphone, check e-mail, check Facebook, check Twitter, put the phone back in your pocket, take it out a minute later, repeat.

I do this, and so do a lot of people. Combine this lack of self-control with increasingly frequent updates, and you have a recipe for senseless distraction. These are updates, not information. Rather than the Information Age, we're living in the Chatter Age.

Sometimes the "information" is just false, as in the "Balloon Boy" case last year: A boy's parents reported that their son was on board a hot-air balloon; after several hours of frantic gab on television stations and on Twitter, it turned out that the whole thing was a hoax. If you came back to your computer after the whole thing was over, as I did, you got it all in reverse order: tweets telling you that the whole thing was a false alarm, followed by post after post about the tragedy. There was no information in those few hours; they may as well not have happened. That wasn't a rare occurrence; there's a whole ecosystem devoted to generating and propagating non-information. If you've been waiting for months to buy a new phone, but have hesitated to do so because the iPhone will come to Ver-

izon "any day now," you've felt the effects of this chatter. Various blogs confidently asserted that there would be "A Verizon iPhone in 2010."

That was noise; it was not information.

Often, this non-information takes on political overtones. During the health care debate in the summer of 2009, someone probably sent you an e-mail purporting to show that the Democratic health bill would require mandatory euthanasia counseling for seniors every

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five years. This prompted a round of counter-chatter, as sites such as Snopes.com leapt into action to disprove those rumors. More recently, social media have helped spread the (less than accurate) idea that "if you cross the U.S. border illegally, you get a Social Security card," whereas if you cross into North Korea you get shot.

Inevitably, lots of people have stepped in to rebut that argument, too. But it's a little absurd when intelligent people feel obliged to respond to unfounded rumors that seem to gain traction and urgency only because they circulate so quickly.

During this election season, I've seen an endless stream of tweets, updates,

and Facebook links offering up reasons why the Democrats might lose big: because of TARP, because the president isn't politicking enough, because people are upset about health reform. These assertions stir people to high indignation.

And yet the underlying story is simple and well documented: If the economy has done poorly over the last year, people vote out the party in power; if it's done well, they re-elect the incumbents. Everything else is noise, whose predictable effect is constant anxiety — and a relentless focus on short-term ups and downs rather than on the long-term state of the world. But amid all these bits of information, there's almost none for which it's important that we form an opinion right away.

As our brains fill with chatter, there's every reason to think this will only get worse; all the incentives are there for more updates, more often. Technology isn't going to solve this. Setting up better electronic filters won't keep this out. Installing products like LeechBlock or Freedom won't solve the problem; that just delays it until the next time you're on the Web.

If we really want the Information Age rather than the Chatter Age, there's only one solution: relearn self-control.

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