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## The Internet and the informational bulimia

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### Abstract

Umberto Eco formulated the phrase that there is “no greater silence than the absolute noise”. The immensity of the online-information in any field is overwhelming today. In this paper I will formulate and look for answers for two key-questions: How much information do we need? How much information can we deal with?

The paper deals with the informational bulimia, pointing to the way we are fed with information every day, being often driven to a consumption we aren't able to control. My attention will be focused on online information: online news, online information for researchers and professionals and the online publishing of books.

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### 1. Introduction

The Internet is one of the most used storage for and source of information today, both revolutionary and overwhelming in its immensity. A couple of years ago, I presented a paper at the Timișoara Academic Days about the Informational Bulimia, a term which I believe needs to be coined for communication and social sciences, feeling that it is important to express on one hand the need and must of being informed and on the other hand the way we are fed with information every day, being often driven to a consumption we aren't able to control anymore. In 2011 I addressed the informational bulimia especially on TV news, this time my attention will be focused on the Internet in three aspects: online news, online information for researchers and the online publishing of books.

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Some questions will rise: Do we need all the information available on the Internet on a subject we are researching? The simple, straight answer is no. Can we deal with all the information available? The simple, straight answer is no, again. What we need is quality, valid information, therefore, a classification of what we might be gathering on the Internet. But what means quality? Who is to define quality? Is the definition of quality subject to time and fashion?

## 2. Informational Bulimia

I'm a bulimic. I'm a bulimic in search and in searching for information. In front of the TV I discovered to be a bulimic for information. Like a bulimic is looking for food in his fridge I am looking for new information after the advertising spots break, wondering what has happened during the five minutes, what has changed or, even worth, I don't wait for these minutes to pass, I zap to find more, updated information on other channels. It happened once, it happened twice, mostly on special events, those breaking news, that, *au contraire* to their pendant in films, the blockbusters, don't paralyse their competitors, on the contrary, we are maybe looking for the subject on different channels or different websites in order to gather new information and keep in touch with the update.

And there are a lot of breaking news: the disaster of Fukushima, the British royal wedding, the abdication of Pope Benedict, the political changes in Romania in summer 2012, and the list is never ending.

I believe I'm not the only bulimic and that this bulimia is supported mainly by television and the Internet. Printed press is constrained by the fixed number of signs and radio has become –after the rise of television – a medium “to go”, a medium which doesn't gather us as it did to families back in its golden years, but a medium we are consuming while doing something else, it has become more or less a voice or a sound in the background.

In 2011 I used the phrase “informational bulimia” to describe the way people are being fed with breaking news at Romanian television.

The relationship between the Internet and the informational bulimia can be put in these terms: The Internet user is more active than the TV-viewer, but can be lured to look for more (deepening and diversifying information– a positive example) or lured even into something she/he doesn't really want (possibly negative example, because of time consumption).

The bulimic of online information is looking for new information clicking her/his way through from link to link, searching different websites in order to gather newer and different information on an interesting subject and keep in touch with the update.

It all depends on the subject and the way it is posted, how it pops up to our eyes. News are tempting and may create addiction.

After searching it on academic databases and reference books like britannica.com or oxfordreference.com, I came to find out that the term “informational bulimia” isn't yet used in a scholarly, academic manner. Yet, I believe the phenomenon becomes obvious and, I fear, widely spread.

I suggest the following definition of informational bulimia:

The *scarcely organized* (or even disorganized), *often induced* (by the medium) and *often unconscious* over-consumption of information *not needed* or *not leading to a goal* (be it problem solving, education or entertainment) but *leading just to unplanned consumption of time* and *possible fatigue* or *even neurosis* is informational bulimia.

## 3. Online news

The online search of news is more focused than the one on TV. The reader goes to the page of an online paper or TV/radio station or starts searching on Facebook or Twitter. The online reader can go directly to the preferred website and find the news. Different online sources express different opinions and maybe even different information. Sometimes driven by curiosity (a sometimes induced curiosity, by so much talking about a breaking subject), we search for more information or photographs: the enthronement of Pope Francis, the birth of British Royal Baby George, Nelson Mandela's death. This might be a reason for searching on extra pages not regularly visited. The nature of the (breaking) news itself can conduct to more consumption of information than usual.

On the other hand, the structure of the web, the links can promote this need to find out more or different information. People tend not only to scroll down, but to hop around, to go to different links, *skimming* and *scanning* are actually the terms used to describe online reading.

News are tempting and they are everywhere. Even when shutting down a program (e.g. yahoo mail), you get news! And Facebook wants to become a large and serious news-provider! (Küchemann, 2013).

The good point: We tend to have preferred sites for news. Each individual tends to favor one, two (a few) sites offering online news (be they newspapers, TVs, radios, blogs, Twitter). We can use our own filtering capacities!

The problematic part: If a person doesn't want to spend too much time online, she/he has to be very well organized and strong or even stubborn! The filtering capacities have to be developed and used!

On the other hand we don't really make use of the diversity online as we don't make use of the broadcasted diversity. "A growing body of research demonstrates that the diversity that is being broadcasted is not the diversity that is being consumed in people's homes," as Natali Helberger shows (2011, 241).

Defending oneself from over-consumption of news is only possible for an empowered reader. It is about the informed, aware, active public, it is what Denis McQuail called "the agents of preference" (1999, 29).

#### 4. Online information for researchers

It was 1995 when Umberto Eco already put the right diagnoses on the traps and risks of the immensity of the online-information: "The computer can also give paralyzing results" was one of Eco's key-sentences in an interview on information (Coppock, 1995, para. 9). This paralyzing effect is due to the immense number of tokens or key-phrases a scholar finds when researching on a topic on the Internet. Eco called this "an excessive retrievability of information" that leads to paralysis (Idem, para. 24). This is exactly the description of what we called the informational bulimia, it occurs when information is in excess and cannot be processed by a single scholar. The information overwhelms one's "reading capability and time", as Eco phrases it (Idem, para. 38). A filter is needed, and Eco himself relies on decimation, which is "random, but based upon past experience" (Idem, para. 42). At the same time, he is aware that this is the case of experienced scholars, "but a student of 20 years old, or even 30 does not have this kind of filtering ability. We have to invent a practice, a theory. A practice or training in decimation" (Idem, para. 46). Because the trap is, as Eco correctly phrased it, that "you can cancel by abundance. You can cancel by subtraction, and you can cancel by increase or addition" (Idem, para. 56).

The necessity Eco described back in 1995 is the filter: "How much can this system remain acephalous? The overloading of the network at some point will impose some filtering and discipline, and at this point we don't know what will happen. The Internet is the greatest possibility of abolishing any or every Big Brother. But it can in a second step open up the possibility for some Big Brothers to occupy the main lines and the main network. At this point I do not know. Secondly: if it remains acephalous, then the abundance of information will be such that either you have reached such a level of maturity that you are able to be your own filter, or you will desperately need a filter, some professional filter. So one again you will ask somebody... an information consultant... to be your gatekeeper!" (Idem, para. 97)

A filter can be either a software or a professional.

Since Eco's interview in 1995, gatekeepers have started to evolve. There are still some questions to be raised: Who has the authority, the skills and the right to be a gatekeeper? Who invests an organization as a gatekeeper? Do gatekeepers establish themselves as such? What are the mechanisms and who supervises them? Who makes the guidelines for gatekeepers? What does this mean in terms of quality and risks? Are we (the users, the scholars) content with the today gatekeepers? (How) can the user shape them in order to make them more useful for him?

A lot of questions to be answered at.

Gatekeepers can be other, already well-known researchers and scholars, but more and more established databases are playing this role.

The gatekeeper (person) is consulted for the reliability and quality of the information to be gathered and should be trustworthy and highly professional himself. This means experience and a wide recognition in the specific domain. Graduates at the chair of professor Hans Bernd Brosius (Institute for Communication Sciences and Media Research), dean of the Faculty for Social Sciences at the "Ludwig Maximilian"-University in Munich, receive a list

of ten commandments, the first one making clear what research has to mean for a young scholar: “Searching for bibliography online doesn’t stop at monographs on the OPAC-system [the university’s library research system], and definitely not at searching on Google or Wikipedia and subsequent snowballing. You will definitely come to search in databases and indexes or issues of journals relevant to your work. English literature is of course part of the literature to be researched” (10 Gebote für Absolventen am Lehrstuhl von Prof. Dr. Hans-Bernd Brosius, para. 1). This is I believe a positive example of a professor making his point in explaining young scholars that Google or Wikipedia, despite the immensity of the information offered, aren’t enough for qualitative research.

It is imperiously necessary to state for students which are the trusted, reliable sources on the Internet. The personal relation with a mentor, a professor is very useful in learning the art of decimation of the overwhelming literature.

As already mentioned, gatekeepers can also be databases, indexes, which have people behind them, but are very technical.

Key-words and abstracts are useful tools to skim through the scientific woods. Moreover they are trustworthy because they are articulated by the authors of the papers themselves. Still, they aren’t infallible.

Numbers are getting more and more important. The numbers of accesses a scientific paper gets, how many scholars accessed a certain paper is talking about the interest in a certain topic, but it shouldn’t be – as it more and more becomes – a single element when talking about quality. Otherwise they become merely equivalent to the “likes” on Facebook. Numbers can tell something about the interest raised by a topic, this is true, but they don’t talk about the quality of the content itself.

We should remember all the cases in which scientists presented their works and received little or no attention or even have been marginalized because they weren’t mainstream or they produced results contrary to the main world image. They sometimes came into attention only years or decades later.

On the other hand, we can’t really tell how many Goethe followers were in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but Goethe survived the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, without having the “likes” on a profile counted.

In this age, quality and visibility on the Internet (image, after all) converge. Getting visibility increases appreciation and viceversa. On the other hand, also fakes can have access to an image-creation on the Internet. Even if they are not approved by or not valuable to a research community they can build an image and gather followers – this is another facet of the democracy of voices on the Internet.

So how can a researcher, especially a young one define what is valuable and consistent? What the research community establishes? What a large public thinks of it (what means “large” in the context of the world wide web)? What mankind needs? I suppose the answer lies at the cross-over of the answers to these questions.

Eco felt almost twenty years ago that the excess of information can drive to a paralysis not only for reading, but also for writing on a certain subject. “[...] we can reach a level at which over-information and censure will identify each other,” is his conclusion (Coppock, 1995, para. 54).

## **5. The Online Publishing of Books**

The Internet diversified and democratized the ways to publish a book. Self-publishing is the newcomer and goes hand in hand with what can be called a democratization of publishing. Websites specialized in self-publishing (e.g. AuthorSolution, AuthorHouse, Create Space) guide writers step by step through an easier, meaning faster and cheaper way to be published than the traditional one involving the rigorous and/but qualified, professional editors from a traditional publishing house. Anyone’s dream to be published can come true today thanks to the Internet. But there rest some questions: Will the new author find readers for his/her book? How will he/she market the book in order to find readers? And: What about quality? Wasn’t the gatekeeper from the traditional publishing house a guarantee for quality? Or is quality just a matter of taste?

“[We have] a heterogeneous, hyper-abundant contemporary book environment where the traditional mixes with the non-traditional and finding books that match a reader’s taste is more difficult than previously and may involve new methods of discovery” note the researchers around Jana Bradley (2011, abstr.).

Now, the first question to be raised is where does the reader look for a book? Does he rely on the “traditional” means, is he searching in his own big library (generations worked to constitute it), is he asking a friend, a relative or a professor (mentor) for a book or is he entering a traditional space of a bookshop or library (with “real” rooms and

shelves)? Or does the book-consumer use new means to find his object of pleasure by searching the website of bookshop-chains (like “Cărturești” in Romania, “Hugendubel” in Germany or “Thalia” in Austria), a strictly online bookshop or library (e.g. *librarie.net*), the website of a publishing house (e. g. *Polirom*, *Humanitas* in Romania) or does he search on Amazon itself (with or without Kindle)? I placed Amazon separately in this line, because of its status deriving from its immensity and pioneering in e-commerce.

Will the reader grab for a printed book, an audio book or an e-book?

And how will the reader search? Will the reader rely on thumbing through a book in a (real, made of bricks) library/bookshop, on an author’s reading in a bookshop or will he rely on a friend’s/relative’s/professor’s direct recommendation? Or will he rely on a friend’s/relative’s/professor’s recommendation on Shelfari or on Facebook, or even a star’s recommendation on Facebook (the difference is the proximity to the reader)? Will the reader rely on reviews of buyers on the website of the publishing house, reviews of buyers on Amazon or sample readings online?

The book-market itself is very diverse and so are the ways to access it. Most probably the selection procedure is a mixture between traditional means and non-traditional ones. Will the new means sometime in future completely replace the old ones? Probably not. I believe that personal tights, personal recommendations from friends, relatives and mentors will co-exist with the new means to find a book. Whether traditional bookshops will all be closed, as the fear exists in France for example, where the government reacted to what was sensed as the Amazon-offensive, is not clear in my opinion. There are some relatively new success-stories of bookshops that became more than just a shop, but a meeting-place and a place where one can sit to drink tea and read a book (the “Cărturești”-chain in Romania with its slogan “Book, tea, music, fancy”) or take part in different events, for example for children (e.g. at “Cartea cu nisip” in Timișoara).

These kind of shops offer something different than an online-bookshop. Finding book is more like a journey, an event. On the other hand, searching on Amazon is more technical and time-saving if you know exactly what you are looking for. So the experiences are different and they address the reader’s needs at different moments and in different situations. That’s the reason why I would rather say they will coexist in future too.

This means that printed books will coexist with multimedia or ebooks, a thesis that rises from the writings of Umberto Eco and Robert Darnton. Robert Darnton, considered a pioneer in the field of book history, shares the same idea with Eco that printed books have an “extraordinary staying power”: “Ever since the invention of the codex in the third or fourth century AD, it has proven to be a marvelous machine – great for packaging information, convenient to thumb through, comfortable to curl up with, superb for storage, and remarkably resistant to damage. It does not need to be upgraded or downloaded, accessed or booted, plugged into circuits or extracted from webs. Its design makes it a delight to the eye. Its shape makes it a pleasure to hold in the hand. And its handiness has made it the basic tool of learning for thousands of years...” (Apud Hillesund, 2007).

And it was Umberto Eco who assured the public that “books will remain indispensable not only to literature, but for any circumstance in which one needs to read carefully, not only to receive information, but also to speculate and reflect about it” (1996). On the other hand, hypertext can be useful, appreciates Eco, for encyclopedias and dictionaries where consulting the “book” is the key-word (1996).

Returning to the question: Will the possible reader “cancel by abundance”, by the flood of book-titles on a specific subject? I believe there is again a great need of instruments and knowledge. The reader needs training in searching, a great deal of self-organization and a very precise aim. A “nose” for finding what one needs has to be trained, meaning a mixture of intuition and past experiences.

## 6. Conclusions

The informational bulimia doesn’t make us more informed, wiser or happier, but this time-eating preoccupation promises fatigue, disorientation and sometimes also the feeling of incapability.

Fighting against it means empowerment of the public. Awareness, consciousness can be gained through training searching and decimating skills as well as skills to recognize trustworthy sources on the Internet.

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