

Challenges of the Information Society

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Ladies and gentlemen; fellow students:

Studying is hard work. It really puts the capacity of your brains to the test, doesn't it?

I'm sure you have all experienced the feeling of complete exhaustion and fatigue after finally finishing a paper, passing a test, or completing a long and demanding project: you wouldn't want to open a single book, read a single line, hear one word that has something to do with the topic. You've had it — you simply can't take anymore of it. All you want to do is to close your eyes, relax and stop thinking — switch off your overstrained brain.

And indeed, there is a limit to how much information processing our brains can handle. The human brain is not a computer.

As translation students, we are advised to read a lot and acquire a good general knowledge: we should know something about everything. We also need to keep up with what's going on in the world. We are encouraged to travel, study and work abroad. The list goes on and on. In short, we are expected to do our best to obtain more and more information and constantly learn new things. When working on our assignments and translations, most of our time is spent on seeking and finding information.

Information seems to be the magic word of today — not just at the Translation department of course, but in the Western world in general. The age that we are living is called the "information age," and present-day society is referred to as the "information society." Nowadays more and more work is about dealing with and processing information, in one form or another, and that is exactly what our future work as translators will be, too.

Technological advances — especially computers and the internet — have radically changed the nature of information — its production, distribution, and most of all, the amount of information available. It has been estimated that in the last 30 years, more information has been produced than in all the previous 5,000 years together.

Information is all around us, streaming into our consciousness from all directions, flooding in all the time from various sources, books, magazines,

television, the radio, telephone, fax machines, e-mail and the internet, just to mention a few. Every waking moment we are bombarded by stimuli and information of various kinds — some of it useful and important; other parts of it totally irrelevant.

We feel that we need to keep up with all that, we need to be up-to-date: it's absolutely necessary that we know everything that's happening around us, what's new and what's in. We think that, in a way, it's our responsibility as intelligent, intellectual people. We hate being ignorant and saying "I don't know". "Knowledge is power," as the saying goes, so we keep collecting intellectual property to carry around with us. We assume that if we know more, we'll understand more.

But it would take a computer to receive, organize and process that overabundance of stimuli and information to which we expose ourselves every minute of the day. It's simply too much for the human brain to absorb at the speed with which it's coming. That's not what the human brain has been programmed to do.

However, we act as if it was: we multitask — like our computers do. We divide our attention to a number of directions, and try to do several things at the same time in order to be more efficient. That is, we try to force our brains to function in a way in which the human brain hasn't really evolved to function. It's unnatural. And our poor, loyal, hardworking brains are struggling to perform the tasks we give them, to take everything in, process it and turn it into knowledge. We give our brains no break, not even in our free time.

The unavoidable consequence of this is information overload, which is a very unproductive state of mind. It feels as if the brain gets stuck: nothing goes in, nothing comes out, and nothing seems to move inside. It's a complete jam on the information superhighway of the brain.

David Lewis, an American psychologist, has introduced the term "information fatigue syndrome," which is described as a "hyper-aroused psychological condition". The symptoms are familiar to all of us, at least to some extent: feeling stupid, slow, inefficient and stressed-out; having difficulties in remembering things, concentrating and making decisions; suffering from anxiety, depression, insomnia and various kinds of physical symptoms such as headaches and elevated blood pressure.

And all this because there were a few stimuli too many coming too fast, too many articles to read or internet sites to surf, a little bit of information too much, which we thought we couldn't possibly do without.

I'm not here to give you advice or to offer easy solutions to the problem or to tell you how to protect yourselves against information fatigue. I don't know how to cope with it myself. The last time I got overloaded and was struck by information fatigue was last night when I was writing this speech. And who knows, perhaps you're experiencing it at this very moment while listening to me and trying to comprehend what I'm talking about.

All I know is that it won't be getting any easier for us in the future, since the information age has only just begun. The explosion of information is still going on, and the rate is not slowing down one bit. On the contrary: Evolution will probably take care of it in time by gradually turning the human brain into a more computer-like system. In the meanwhile, human beings just need to adapt.

However, one way to alleviate the symptoms of information fatigue is simply to switch your brain off every once in a while, and give your thoughts a rest. Go sit on a rock by a lake and stare at the horizon in perfect silence, for example. Perhaps after a few hours of meditation you will be able to face the challenges of the modern information society again, and absorb still more information.

I wish you good luck. Thank you.

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