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Information Overload: La Mothe le Vayer and the Digital Age

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Abstract: This paper deals with the 17th century information explosion and its influence on scholarly reading behaviour. The invention of the printing press had increased drastically the amount of books and at the same time, the volume of knowledge. As a result, it became very difficult for researchers to embrace the full account of available science. Starting from the work of the French libertine Sceptic François de La Mothe le Vayer (1588–1672), the analysis will focus on two major questions of 17th century research: The first question “Is the immense profusion of books instructive or rather confusing?” will be the basis for a second one: “Hasn’t everything been said? Is it still possible to add something to this colossal knowledge?”

Keywords: Information Overload, Information Explosion, Reading, François de La Mothe le Vayer, Skepticism

Introduction

IT HAS NOW become commonplace to assert that we are living in the “age of information”, as Marshall McLuhan wrote in 1964. According to Robert Darnton (2007: 166), the amount of books “published worldwide each year is now greater than ever – more than a million, or a rate of publication that comes to one book every 30 seconds”. In addition to this, it is almost impossible to assess the number of existing web pages. In 2005 researchers estimated the size of the Internet at 11.5 billions pages, and obviously these data have already become obsolete (Mesguich – Thomas 2010: 13–15). Three years ago, Google stated that they had counted one trillion unique URLs (Alpert – Hajaj 2008). In a recent attempt to measure the amount of available information, Martin Hilbert and Priscila López (2011) found out that the world’s storage capacity had already been raised to an unimaginable 2.9×10^{20} bytes of optimally compressed information in 2007.

As the volume of available knowledge is steadily reaching new heights, the abundance of information appears, in some way, to be a curse rather than a blessing. Researchers are struggling to deal with enormous amounts of information and to keep abreast of the publications in their research field (Rapple 2011).

Actually, what we are experiencing now is not the first information explosion in the history of humanity. During Early Modern times, between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, another scientific revolution took place. Important discoveries were reflected in a proliferation of new books. This situation raised a lot of questions, some of which remain unanswered in the 21st century. This paper will focus on two of those questions. The first one is: “Is the immense profusion of books instructive or rather confusing?” This questioning naturally leads to a second, desperate one: “Hasn’t everything been said? Is it still possible to add something to this colossal knowledge?”

These questions were also relevant to François de La Mothe le Vayer (1588–1672), a seventeenth-century French libertine thinker. La Mothe le Vayer was acquainted with the most important intellectual circles in Paris. As a regular visitor to Marie de Gourmay's salon, he also associated with the very erudite and austere intellectuals around the Dupuy brothers. La Mothe le Vayer was a very prolific writer. His best known works probably are his *Dialogues Faits à l'Imitation des Anciens*, a collection of imaginary philosophical conversations with a quite skeptic slant, first edited in 1630 (Kerviler 1879: 31). Besides philosophy and history, the author was interested in a broad range of topics such as travel literature and technical issues (Pintard 1983: 139). In 1639, La Mothe le Vayer became a member of the French Academy. Active in the Parliament, he worked as a historiographer of France and was appointed to tutor Louis XIV and his brother. In this context, he wrote introductions to geography, rhetoric, logic, and physics etc., to be used by his princely pupils.

Because of his activities, La Mothe le Vayer was concerned by the consequences of the seventeenth-century information explosion. He developed his views on the subject in a letter explaining how to form a library of a hundred books and in a little treatise about the reading and writing of books, entitled *Observations diverses sur la composition, & sur la lecture des livres*. As the digital age still has difficulties managing the overabundance of knowledge, it is worth looking back to the ideas of La Mothe le Vayer.

La Mothe le Vayer is a relatively rarely studied author. René Pintard's *Le Libertinage Erudit* remains a mandatory reference. This work, which traces the intellectual history of La Mothe le Vayer and his friends, dates back to 1943. For a few years, La Mothe le Vayer has triggered renewed interest from scholars such as Sylvia Giocanti (2001), Isabelle Moreau (2007) and Sophie Gouverneur (2005), who study the very complex phenomenon of seventeenth-century French libertinism, a way of thinking associated with freedom of thought and atheism. Their field of research focuses on libertinism and deals above all with philosophical, religious, political or sometimes literary issues. In this essay, we would like to broaden the perspective, linking La Mothe le Vayer with the information explosion, which is a matter of general interest as well as a topical subject for information scholars.

The analysis of La Mothe le Vayer's texts will be based on a theoretical framework that identifies the characteristics of a historical moment of information explosion. In this way, it becomes possible to compare the century La Mothe le Vayer lived in with the digital age.

Framework

While we are witnessing the digital revolution, the 17th century was crucial in the development of what is now referred to as the "scientific revolution". Both information revolutions relate to more or less objective facts, but also to a very human feeling of receiving "too much information". The relationship between human perception and a certain amount of information is expressed in the concept of "information overload". The phenomenon, which was studied by David Bawden and Lyn Robinson (2009) and Martin Eppler and Jeanne Mengis (2004), refers to a discrepancy between "the individual's information-processing capacity" and "the information-processing requirements of an individual. Information overload occurs when the supply exceeds the capacity" (Eppler – Mengis 2004: 326).

The term "information overload" has appeared in the 20th century, so it may seem anachronistic to apply it to the 17th century. Nevertheless, as argued by Ann Blair (2003, 2010), information overload has probably always existed, even if the word is a recent invention. In

1255, Vincent of Beauvais already wrote a compilation summarizing the most interesting parts of the books he had read, because “the multitude of books, the shortness of time and the slipperiness of memory” made it impossible to assimilate the overabundance of written texts (Blair 2003: 12). Of course, there are important differences between the new millennium and the Middle Ages or to the 17th century. The two kinds of information revolutions are not identical either. However, recent research shows it is possible to draw some striking parallels between these two ages of information on a general level (Blair 2010; Robinson – Bawden 2000).

Yet, as Barbara Tuchman’s (1980: 13) famous quote has it, books are reputed to be “the carriers of civilization”. In this perspective, researchers usually consider science is humanity’s most precious treasure, and so they have always dreamed of a universal form of knowledge. This kind of illusion is deemed to be a problem, which becomes acute in moments of great changes (Rosenberg 2003). In a changing world, new discoveries require a reassessment of the whole intellectual framework, altering even the idea of relevant knowledge itself. In this sense, the information problem is closely related with the “future shock” thesis formulated by Alvin Toffler (1970): too many technological or socio-cultural changes make the entire intellectual system collapse, which leads to a sense of loss of control that is typical of information overload. Thus, it becomes clear that information overload has an objective side, related to knowledge itself, as well as a subjective side, related to human experience. These two sides of the same medal can be used to compare the phenomenon of information overload in the 17th century and in the new millennium.

Concerning knowledge, statistical data like the doubling of the size of American scholarly libraries between 1876 and 1990 tend to suggest that the twenty-first-century rise in information really exists (Bawden – Robinson 2009: 184). An attempt at objectivization has been made in an article published in *Science* by Martin Hilbert and Priscila López (2011). Their study reveals that humankind’s storage capacity increases by 23% every year. The researchers conclude that “in contrast to natural information processing, the world’s technological information processing capacities are quickly growing at clearly exponential rates”. The world has become a global village and every single individual is daily overwhelmed with an avalanche of stimuli from all continents. In addition, the economic landscape is being profoundly reshaped, so all conditions are met to produce an information overload.

Like the 21st century, the 17th century was marked by major cultural and socio-political changes and many scientific discoveries. The most famous examples probably come from the fields of physics or astronomy – with the establishment of heliocentrism, among other things – but the rise in information affected almost every scientific discipline. In medicine, for instance, William Harvey published his groundbreaking survey about blood circulation in 1628. Researchers had to cope with all these novelties.

The advancement of knowledge is obviously related to technological innovations, such as the CERN’s particle accelerator or Galileo’s telescope. Between these technological innovations, means of information dissemination hold a very particular place. The beginning of the Internet in the 1990s opened mines of information on a broad range of topics. Ten years later, “the introduction of broadband Internet effectively multiplied the world’s telecommunication capacity by a factor of 29” in a period of seven years (Hilbert – López 2011). In Early Modern Times, the advent of what Marshall McLuhan called the “Gutenberg galaxy” had quite similar effects. The invention of the printing press drastically increased the number of books, and, at the same time, the volume of available knowledge (Eisenstein 1979). Ac-

cording to Henri-Jean Martin's (1969; 1984: 95–96) statistical study, this evolution had become very clear in the first half of the 17th century, as the number of printed books grew rather steadily at that moment. Such an objective context was conducive to creating a subjective sense of information overload.

The Early Modern increase in information was actually an obvious reason for scientific optimism. Enlightenment scholars, like Condorcet, felt privileged: humankind had taken possession of an unprecedented wealth of knowledge, and science seemed close to reach perfection. Nevertheless, the explosion of information quickly became somewhat inconvenient and became a threat to researchers. As it was becoming impossible to embrace a universal form of knowledge, a fit of confusion seized learned circles. Charlie Rappaport's (2011) report shows the same fear haunts present day researchers. Researchers need to keep up with the publications in their research area, but feel overwhelmed by the enormous masses of references.

Rosenberg (2003: 6–9) suggests that the sense of information overload cannot be explained solely in terms of quantity, but also in terms of quality of information: information overload would be caused by the individual's difficulty to assess information, and this kind of embarrassment is quite natural in periods of intellectual shift, in which "future shocks" occur. In a changing world, norms are changing too, as is the canon of authoritative texts the reader can refer to as standards of "truth" (Rosenberg 2003: 7).

From a general point of view, it is true that no debate about information goes without reflection on quality issues. This statement looks like a truism in the digital age, but it was already relevant in Early Modern Europe. In both cases, new means of communication have improved the dissemination of information. The comparison between these two moments of transformation of the intellectual landscape has been made by David Bawden and Lyn Robinson (2000: 54). Basing themselves on the work of E. Eisenstein, they observe a lot of similarities. There is even an Early Modern equivalent of the present-day discussion about pornographic files which circulate on the Internet without barriers. More intense fluxes of information have always unpleasant side effects: more information means more junk, which makes it harder to distinguish the most reliable material. In Early Modern Europe, the invention of the printing press allowed the spread of books of minor quality (Eisenstein 1979; Bawden – Robinson 2000: 54). As for the Internet, the problems are well known. Everyone can publish content of anything kind without the slightest form of control.

Poor information quality contributes to create a sense of overload and needs to be connected with the reader who has to deal with different kinds of information. It is up to him to decide upon the use he makes of different materials. The quality of the information processing is as important for research purposes as the quality of information itself. This topic has been long and widely discussed in the context of the digital revolution. More particularly, the information literacy and the reading skills of the "Google generation" have been the subject of many debates. William Badke (2010) for instance, notes that digital natives often prefer information of minor quality, if it is easily accessible. It seems clear that the advent of the Internet has changed human reading behavior. Surfers skim rather than read, and, according to Nicholas Carr (2008, 2010), they continue to do so when they are confronted with a printed book. In the new millennium, looking up is replacing memory. Nicholas Carr (2010: 193–195) fears that the end of memorization also means the end of culture. He argues the human mind is not a just a hard disk, useful for information retrieval. The brain is sustained by memory and creative thinking cannot be separated from its storage activity.

Although the digital age is obviously characterized by very specific problems, related to a new medium, the difference between the 21st century and Early Modern Europe is not absolute (Blair 2003). Assiduous work was only one of the methods used by humanists to handle the flow of new information. They also developed techniques to improve, speed up and save time in note taking. Bookmarks, indexes and, in the case of Newton, even dog-earing helped them to identify the most interesting elements in a text. Other strategies to reduce workload, such as partial reading, were less orthodox. In some cases, Early Modern scholars did not return to an author's text, but relied on a compilation which summarized the main ideas.

La Mothe le Vayer. The Usefulness of the Book

The usefulness of the book was a major topic in seventeenth-century literature on reading. The discussion dates back to Seneca, a mandatory reference for every humanist. In *De Tranquillitate Animi* (1927: 89–90: IX, 4–7), the Stoic denounces the human propensity to gather huge book collections which are so extensive that they become unmanageable. Men should only possess the copies they are able to read. When a book remains on the shelf without being read, it becomes a useless luxury item. It becomes a piece of interior decoration, whose only use is to display false erudition. A well-filled personal library suggests indeed that the owner is a learned person. However, according to Seneca, it is never a good idea to buy too many books, even if it is for scholarly reasons and not in order to parade a non-existing knowledge. Seneca thinks too much reading puts excessively high pressure on the human mind. When one tries to read everything, this only leads to confusion. So it seems more efficient to him to study a limited number of authors.

La Mothe le Vayer (1758: 125–126) refers explicitly to Seneca. He agrees that it is wrong to buy books just to impress one's guests with false knowledge, but, unlike the stoic philosopher, he defends the humanist tradition of large book collections. He supports his point of view with the argument that books can always be useful to other persons, even if their owner does not read them. To understand this idea, we need to place it in its historical context. At the threshold of the 17th century, the first public libraries had made their appearance. The Vatican Library, founded in 1451, was already open to researchers, while the Bodleian Library in Oxford had welcomed the public since 1602. In France, the first public library was created in 1643 by Mazarin, following the advice of his librarian Gabriel Naudé, who was a close friend of François de La Mothe le Vayer (Franklin 1860: 8). So the development of public libraries was quite new, and private book collections still played an important role for researchers (Waquet – Bots 1997: 138–139). The exchange of books between individuals was essential to Early Modern scholarly life and scholars often opened their personal libraries to colleagues and friends.

La Mothe le Vayer's (1758: 126) second argument to support large book collections is that books are the medicine of the mind. By this he means that books sharpen human reason: reading improves thinking. La Mothe le Vayer read a lot of books and Manea (2010) noticed that erudition was central in his life. At this point, we can put forward that La Mothe le Vayer's questions are not about the usefulness of books, but about the use readers make of them.

In the first place, La Mothe le Vayer (1756: 355–356) stresses the notion of concentration in his answer. Useful reading implies a profound penetration of the textual material. Such

thoughtful reading was not an obvious practice in La Mothe le Vayer's age, nor is it in the new millennium. Nicholas Carr, who insists that memory should be part of reading, shares La Mothe le Vayer's opinion: "The key to memory consolidation is attentiveness" (Carr 2010: 193). If concentration is the key to useful reading, this means, both for Carr and La Mothe le Vayer, that the reader needs to be consistent in his activity. According to La Mothe le Vayer (1756: 355–356), it is necessary to follow the whole reasoning of an author instead of picking up minor details in many different books that one consults without understanding them comprehensively. Therefore, it is necessary to read with order. Without order, books only lead to chaos and confusion, but if used properly, they can become a foundation to construct new ideas. In the same way, Nicholas Carr (2010: 103) regrets the present-day tendency to jump from one page to another on digital reading devices, because the reader is actually consuming small pieces of information without much global understanding.

In the second place, it would be crucial to highlight the role of assessment in La Mothe le Vayer's way of reading. When La Mothe le Vayer (1756: 355) insists on the importance of concentration, he is not linking learning to memorizing. Real knowledge does not amount to an accumulation of facts and readings, but requires a critical analysis. Readers should think for themselves. According to La Mothe le Vayer, this means, for instance, that authors must not be judged on their mere reputation. An obscure title may add useful information to an important reference work (La Mothe le Vayer 1756: 362). Moreover, books should not lead to intellectual slavery. Combining intellectual inconstancy with a rhetoric problem, readers too easily think the last work they read gave them access to the one and only truth, until they start another book. Books are always written to convince their public, which is often seduced by beautiful sentences and not by facts. The content of books should not be confused with truth (La Mothe le Vayer 1756: 352–353). Thus, reading has to be done carefully.

Information should be treated with caution. This is not only the case for the 17th century reader, but also for the digital native. As the information on the Internet has not necessarily been checked before it was published, information literacy is also the competence to assess the reliability of information on the internet. So, information professionals often insist on the fact that the results of a Google search should not be taken for granted.

Nevertheless, there is an important difference between La Mothe le Vayer and present-day scholars. La Mothe le Vayer does not only evaluate information with the aim to check its reliability or quality. Rather than a strictly utilitarian work, the assessment of information is a real mental exercise. Every book is an occasion to think and to train the reader's critical skills. Thus, La Mothe le Vayer (1756: 362–363; 368–375) doubts of the existence of entirely bad books. Every book offers interesting elements and can be useful, if it is well used. If novels and fables do not contribute to scientific progress, the reader may appreciate their elegant style. According to La Mothe le Vayer (1756: 273), it does not make sense to look for philosophy in a novel, or to study philosophy to get some entertainment. Quality is not absolute, and depends on the type of publication one reads. In this respect, every book is valuable in some way.

La Mothe le Vayer's attitude toward books reflects his philosophical views. La Mothe le Vayer (1756: 378) refuses every form of dogmatism and embraces radical skepticism, as Richard Popkin (2003: 84) has shown. He accepts that every occasion has its own truth. According to La Mothe le Vayer (1756: 381–385), really learned men recognize the funda-

mental uncertainty of everything on earth, as well as the vanity of the passions. To achieve true wisdom, men have to accept the limits of human knowledge.

Paradoxically, skepticism can be supported by the reading of books. While he turns the pages, the reader travels across space and time. In this way, he realizes that customs are different depending on the historical moment or geographic area. So the reader considers different theories and questions his own truth and sharpens his critical thinking. He understands that truth cannot remain monolithic anymore and adopts skepticism.

La Mothe le Vayer. The Future of Knowledge

If skepticism affects all aspects of human life, destroying every possibility of truth, it is rather unlikely that researchers can really add anything to existing knowledge. However, La Mothe le Vayer (1756: 375–376), who himself devoted a lot of time to learning, considered that intellectuals could continue their work. Studying can bring absolute joy.

According to La Mothe le Vayer, erudite activities are part of a learning process that leads to the suspension of judgment. This is the way to achieve ataraxia, the tranquility of the soul, as it has been described by Philippe-Joseph Salazar (2000: 60). Ataraxia opens the gate to real joy and is bliss in itself. This state of supreme happiness goes along with the moderation of the passions (Pintard 1983: 506–509). Refraining from judging, one does not need to be always right and does not get involved in vain quarrels. For the seventeenth-century researcher ataraxia is real freedom of the mind.

For La Mothe le Vayer, scholarship is independent of ontological truth. Scholarly activity is valuable in itself, because it brings happiness. According to La Mothe le Vayer, knowledge is a source of intellectual enjoyment, and, therefore, a treasure. Learning is a process in which books have a role to play. Intellectuals can achieve ultimate satisfaction through study, but happiness also resides in the studying process itself. Pleasure lies in the activity of learning. To achieve happiness, intellectuals retire from a turbulent existence to devote themselves to erudition (La Mothe le Vayer 1758: 136).

Skepticism and scholarship are not at all incompatible. In fact, practical considerations prevail against any misgivings as to the actual truth of what is said in the books. What matters is that readers can use some of their material. Even if nothing is sure, scholars can produce useful knowledge: utility can replace truth. For instance, Pietro Capitani (2009: 194–202) has shown that even historical information is doubtful in the eyes of La Mothe le Vayer. Nevertheless, La Mothe le Vayer considered history to deserve scholarly attention because it provides valuable testimonies, enabling scholars to make ethical choices.

Previous research, by scholars like Richard Popkin (2003: 82) reveals that La Mothe le Vayer's skepticism is rooted in a very old tradition, which dates back to Antiquity, so it seems somewhat superficial to explain his philosophical ideas as consequences of information overload or a future shock. However, La Mothe le Vayer (1756: 375–376) acknowledges the existence of the information explosion, as well as the potential problems which are related to it, in a way that seems very familiar to present-day researchers. He describes how his contemporaries wondered if the scientific process had come to an end, because of the multiplication of books. The possibility of making new discoveries had become rather doubtful. La Mothe le Vayer did not share this point of view. Scholarship does not have to get crushed under the weight of the scientific work produced in the past, especially in the Antiquity. La Mothe le Vayer (1756: 376–377) does not believe the Ancients “have thrown away the ladder

to Parnassus” after they climbed up. On the contrary, their work can, on the one hand, be a basis for the construction of new ideas. On the other hand, modern philosophers are allowed to wipe the slate clean: thinking requires intellectual freedom.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of information overload was as real in the 17th century as it is in the new millennium: due to new philosophic and religious ideas, the face of the world was changing and a flood of books inundated the market. Many new discoveries emerged indeed. All these objective factors were combined to produce a sense of information overload. Objective evolutions raised subjective doubts among contemporaries on the usefulness of books, and the future of science. These doubts are reflected in two questions: “Is the immense profusion of books instructive or rather confusing?”. And: “Hasn’t everything been said? Is it still possible to add something to this colossal knowledge?”

Even if François de La Mothe le Vayer was aware of the information problem, he was not affected by such doubts. So his answers to our two questions are rather optimistic. In this sense, La Mothe le Vayer does not suffer from the subjective implications of information overload: enormous amounts of books do not intimidate his erudite ambitions, and, as noticed by Manea (2010) he has always continued to read a lot. It seems always possible to him to build upon the work of past thinkers. According to La Mothe le Vayer, science has not come to an end yet. Furthermore, La Mothe le Vayer thinks great masses of books are useful rather than confusing. Books have automatically an intrinsic value for La Mothe le Vayer, because they nourish the mind. Reading sharpens critical thinking and helps the individual to overcome his preconceptions. The reader gets engaged in a comparative process in which he evaluates books as well his own ideas. In the digital age, it is obvious that information has to be viewed with a critical eye. La Mothe le Vayer goes further. He does not simply assess information to decide on the use he will make of it. It seems that, for La Mothe le Vayer, the evaluation process is a real research method: the reader learns how to think and, in this way, he serves the advancement of human knowledge. That is why reading requires a lot of attention. According to La Mothe le Vayer (1756: 355), focus is essential in the development of human understanding. The quality of the reading process does not depend on the book, but on the person holding it in their hands and their capacity for reflection. So the close reading of a limited number of authors is more useful than a quick and superficial vast study, according to La Mothe le Vayer (1756: 355; 1758: 130), who seems to have his information consumption under control. The discussion about intensive reading still sounds very familiar in the 21st century, even if the problem arises in a different way as new media influence human reading behavior.

Ann Blair (2010) has outlined that humankind has always developed ways to scroll quickly through information. She also found historical evidence of information overload in Early Modern Europe. In this sense, it is not surprising that some similarities exist between La Mothe le Vayer’s ideas and the 21st century information debate. Nevertheless, even if the two information explosions are likely to produce information overload, the parallelism is not perfect. La Mothe le Vayer’s skepticism highlights the historical distance between the 17th century and the digital age. For La Mothe le Vayer, books are part of a search for knowledge, as they show the diversity that exists in this world. So readers learn they should suspend their judgment, because of the ontological relativity of truth. In other words, para-

doxically, books support skepticism, which is not associated with despair but with wisdom. The skeptic process leads indeed to intellectual joy. So studying is valuable to La Mothe le Vayer, precisely because it shows there is no real truth.

In a broader perspective, this analysis is concordant with the work of scholars from the field of libertinism in the tradition of René Pintard (1983), like Sophie Gouverneur (2005) or Isabelle Moreau (2007). La Mothe le Vayer's attitude is indeed typical of seventeenth-century French libertinism, which was actually quite an erudite approach to thinking. Libertines preferred to withdraw from the world, to live in peace. They did not fight for their own truth or for their political opinions. So they did not feel the need to claim specific rights or to wage a battle of ideas. For libertines, the truth of books is, indeed, just as relative as the truth of personal opinions.

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