

1999

## Data Smog: Surviving the Information Glut

Brent Stuart Goodwin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Goodwin, Brent Stuart (1999) "Data Smog: Surviving the Information Glut," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 52 : No. 1 , Article 29.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol52/iss1/29>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

His final descent into treachery was problematic and needs little scrutiny here. Indeed Martin reserves but a few pages to address the actual betrayal at West Point. By 1780 the Revolution had reached its nadir, and Arnold himself had discarded its ideals. With his commitment to virtuous service completely eroded, he forsook the cause to which he had dedicated so much energy. Therein lies the true tragedy of Benedict Arnold.

COLE C. KINGSEED  
Colonel, U.S. Army

---

Shenk, David. *Data Smog: Surviving the Information Glut*. San Francisco, Calif.: Harper Edge, 1997. 250pp. \$24

For most of history, the quest for knowledge and its component, information, promised to improve the quality of people's lives. In this century many in the national security community have come to believe that more information will increase the quality of policy makers' decisions. But is information *power*? Shenk argues that technology has increased the amount of information available to such an extent that very little of it is of any use. Scholars, researchers, and decision makers can become stricken with "analysis paralysis"—either swamped in too much information that is of too little use, or forever waiting for the next piece of information to come in before taking action or making a decision. Shenk is not antitechnology but rather a technoskeptic: technology allows us to do what we do faster and in more abundance, but not always better. Technology does

not fix systemic organizational problems; applying it as a cure-all increases implementation costs and does not lead to solutions of management difficulties. Moreover, it is not a substitute for sound thinking and good policy.

For the first time in history, then, increasing the amount of information is not the automatic solution to a problem. While this book is written for a general, almost "pop," audience, it should be of interest to crisis decision makers and the intelligence community in particular. It is written in easy-to-understand, conversational language, which makes the author's points easy to generalize to other contexts.

What the book lacks, however, is a satisfactory suggestion for dealing with today's increase of information. The author suggests limiting our overload by decreasing our use of technology (the Internet, e-mail, faxes, etc.) to gather information, and increasing the amount of time set aside for reflection about a *reasonable* amount of data. This is a good start, but what is needed to deal with "data smog" is more rigorous thinking *about* the information and where a given piece of information "fits." In short, we need better theory and policy regarding what is being observed, sought, and so on. Pieces of information are like grains of sand—you should not need to see each grain to know that you are on a beach, and you should not need to see each grain to know that there will be high and low tides on that beach. We can know these things because we have a general theory of the sea. The result is the development of "rules of thumb," or shortcuts to information, which speed up its evaluation and interpretation and

## 162 Naval War College Review

thus prevent analysis paralysis. Policy makers and commanders in the field do not need all the information that technology affords them, because, as Shenk points out, beyond a certain level of information the quality of the decision product diminishes. Increasing information results in a need for better frameworks for evaluating that information. *Data Smog* provides

little insight toward developing them; nonetheless, it is a helpful book for identifying information overload and its consequences, as well as an important first step toward solving the problem.

BRENT STUART GOODWIN  
Brown University

---

*Reproduction and reprinting is subject to the Copyright Act of 1976 and applicable treaties of the United States. To obtain permission to reproduce material bearing a copyright notice, or to reproduce any material for commercial purposes, contact the editor for each use. Material not bearing a copyright notice may be freely reproduced for academic or other noncommercial use; however, it is requested that such reproductions credit the author and the Naval War College Review, and that the editor be informed.*

*The Naval War College Review is listed in Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory, Military Media Database, in Free Magazines for Libraries, and by Oxbridge Communications; it is microformed by University Microfilms International (UMI) of Ann Arbor, Michigan; it is abstracted in International Political Science Abstracts, the Lancaster Index to Defence & International Security Literature, and in the Joint Warfighting Center Futures Database; and it is indexed in the Air University Index to Military Periodicals, in Historical Abstracts and America: History and Life (both ABC-CLIO), the International Bibliography of Periodical Literature, the International Bibliography of Book Reviews, and selectively in the American Foreign Policy Index and INFO-SOUTH. A bound 1948–1991 index of all Review feature articles is available from the editorial office; it is updated annually in the Winter issue. Our reviews (beginning with Spring 1994) are indexed in Book Review Index (Gale Research, Inc.). A bound index of book reviews since 1948 is in preparation.*

*The Naval War College Press is listed in the Gale Research, Inc., Directory of Publications and Broadcast Media. A catalog of Naval War College Press offerings is available by request to the editorial office, and on the Press online service, <http://www.nwc.navy.mil/press>.*