

# The Information Age

by

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Social scientists have identified three distinct ages that serve as a brief outline of history.

**The Agricultural Age:** the time period that spans most of known history to about 1860. Named for the main occupation that involved over 90% of all workers - farming. The main context was the small rural town. The key unit was the extended family.

**The Industrial Age:** the time period from 1860 to about 1956. Named for the growth of industrial factories. The main context was the city. The key unit was the nuclear family.

**The Information Age:** the time period from 1956 to the present. Named for the rapid growth of technology. The main context is the world. The key unit is the fractured family.

## Information Explosion

Peter Drucker writes that in our "knowledge-based society," information is the key resource and building block for every type of organization. Information is the new "money," currency upon which organizations rise or fall.

John Naisbitt suggests that "we now mass-produce information the way we used to mass-produce cars."

Note these signs of the information explosion:

•**Computers:** Between 1946 and 1960 the number of computers grew from 1 to 10,000. From 1960 to 1980 to 10,000,000! By the year 2000 there were over 80,000,000 in the United States alone. The number of components that can be programmed into a computer chip is doubling every eighteen months.

•**Publications:** Approximately 9,600 different periodicals are published in the United States each year. About 1,000 books are published internationally every day.

Printed information doubles every eight years. Keeping up with our reading takes on new meaning.

**Libraries:** The world's great libraries are doubling in size every 14 years. In the early 1300s, the Sorbonne Library in Paris contained only 1,338 books and yet was thought to be the largest library in Europe. Today, there are several libraries in the world with an inventory of well over 8 million books each.

**Periodicals:** The Magazine Publishers Association notes that 265 more magazines are being published this year than last year, which works out to about one a day if magazine creators take weekends off. Newsstands offer a choice of 2,500 different magazines.

**Knowledge:** More new information has been produced in the last 50 years than in the previous 5,000. The English language contains roughly 500,000 usable words. That's about five times more than during the time of Shakespeare. Today information doubles every 4 years!

**Yellow Pages:** The Pacific Bell Yellow pages is used about 3.5 million times a day. There are 33 million copies of 108 different directories with 41 billion pages of information.

**Dictionaries:** The new second edition of the Random House Dictionary of the English Language contains more than 315,000 words, has 2,500 pages, weighs 13.5 pounds, and has 50,000 new entries.

**Business:** U.S. businesses report that half of their work forces have jobs that are information-related. A new position, the CIO or Chief Information Officer, is responsible for managing information in many businesses.

**General:** Getting a credit card approval in Paris involves a 46,000 mile journey over phone lines that takes place in 5 seconds. A weekday edition of The New York Times contains more information than the average person was likely to come across in a lifetime in 17th century England.

## **Information Overload**

All of this information is good. Right? Wrong! Consider a few implications.

**1. Travel:** In 1914 the typical American averaged 2,640 miles per year in travel. Today the average car owner averages 10,000 miles per year with some traveling 30,000 or more miles per year! Many people will travel over 3,000,000 miles in their lifetimes.

**Implication:** People are tired, have less free time and are more difficult to recruit.

**2. Change:** The world today is as different from 50 years ago as 1934 was from the time of Julius Caesar. Within a couple of decades the share of the industrialized nations' work force engaged in manufacturing will be no more than 5% to 10%.

"Knowledge workers" will take their place.

**Implication:** People oppose change, resist making friends and wonder why they are lonely.

**3. Saturation:** In one year, the average American will read or complete 3,000 notices and forms, read 100 newspapers and 36 magazines, watch 2,463 hours of television, listen to 730 hours of radio, buy 20 records, talk on the telephone almost 61 hours and read 3 books.

**Implication:** People hear so much noise, so much "informational cacophony" that they are not going to hear you.

**4. Specialization:** The sheer volume of data makes it inevitable that we must focus on the narrow endeavor. Our information explosion results in a fragmentation of knowledge leading to specialization, overspecialization and subspecialization.

**Implication:** People cannot see the big picture, tie the ends together, or see how the pieces relate.

**5. Memory:** People are plagued with "Chinese-dinner" memory dysfunction! They forget what they learn within one hour! Created by placing an emphasis on short-term memory characterized by cramming unnecessary information for unnecessary tests to get unnecessary grades.

**Implication:** People hear Information, learn it and lose it without much effect on their lives.

**6. Inaccuracies:** The General Accounting Office of the IRS found that of the letters written to the IRS by people with tax questions, 53% were answered correctly, 31% contained major errors, and 16% were unclear or incomplete. When the IRS received phone calls 36% of the callers were given wrong answers!

**Implication:** People know information is out there, have difficulty getting it and make mistakes without it.

**7. Amnesia:** Overload Amnesia results when the brain shuts down to protect itself. You cannot recall even simple information such as a friend's name when trying to

introduce them to another person. Often happens in classrooms, conferences, lectures and while attending church.

**Implication:** People hear more than they understand, forget what they already know and resist learning more.

**8. Confusion:** Everyone knows the feeling of buying a high-technology product (VCR?), getting it home and not understanding how to program it. Each new form the IRS adds for Income Tax preparation reportedly adds an additional 20 minutes of time for completion.

**Implication:** People don't know how to use what they learn, make mistakes when they try and feel guilty about it.