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Warning: Information Overload



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The convergence of telecom, media and computing is changing the way we work, play and live. An unbelievable quantum of information has become available to the masses.

The unpredictable effect of the information overload is an explosion of ideas, mass confusion and biased and misplaced conclusions drawn. And it is something we will need to learn to live with. However, change is here to stay.

The effects, in the long run, will be beneficial in terms of business revolutions, better services, lower costs, lower emissions, better learning, etc. But while the new age is settling down, we will need to deal with hacking, loss of privacy, mass production of errors, mass confusion, inability to differentiate useful information from propaganda and so on.

We will also paradoxically see increasing isolation and divisions along national and religious beliefs, and decline of liberal arts: individualism, art, nature, etc. Information overload also leads to a reversion to natural biases resulting in our teaming up with clones and making the rest our enemies (as witnessed on Facebook and other social media platforms, and trolling). Also, unconsciously, it results in leading us to believe that we

are the masters of our fate.

Now, let us superimpose some political science, specifically the belief that society could be understood to the extent that it could be measured and quantified. This was a belief that was incorrect as political scientists realised that human affairs are dominated by whims and prejudices, and not by reason and logic.

In trying to arrive at the physics — predictability and preciseness — of society, we have progressed through the catastrophe theory, the chaos theory and the latest complexity theory, which basically says that despite our pitiful ignorance of why humans behave the way they do, it is possible to predict the way they behave collectively by limiting effects of free individual will and arriving at expected behaviour on collective will.

Basically, we apply principles of science to figure out how people interact, make decisions, cast votes, form alliances, groups and companies. Clearly, this cannot be the feeding of numbers into a universal equation, out of which emerges a description of

human behaviour.

We will have to construct cases by example, and the tools need to be adapted to each specific purpose. History shows that we get trouble whenever information growth outpaces our understanding of how to process it.

Numbers do not speak for themselves. We speak for them. There is a tendency to construe them in self-serving ways leading to vastly different conclusions detached from their objective reality.

So, what kind of world are we moving into? We arrived at this world through misery, wars, pride and prejudice. Most wars examined in retrospect would show that many of those who slaughtered one another would have found very little to dispute if they had used logic and reason, rather than pride and prejudice and wielded words instead of swords. Paradoxically, history shows us that the greater the religious diversity, the greater the intolerance.

What society wants is stability, food, liberty and the basics of life. How humans govern themselves to achieve

these objectives is the problem.

The neo-liberal idea of a democracy, free trade and migration, etc, has not produced a 'Utopian' society. Free trade and immigration are being wrongly blamed for unemployment, disparity of income and terrorism. The main culprit is technology reducing the jobs that are created. Skill gap and knowledge are becoming more important than capital in creating wealth.

Last but not the least, misguided and/or underprivileged souls are probably sparking terrorism. The new thinking of protectionism, restricting immigration and changing preferences in politics is probably not the solution either.

So, we are back to the drawing board. For clues as to what the future holds, we can look back to what the last information revolution — the printing press — produced.

It was the spark for the Industrial Revolution. It set in motion the events that would produce the European Revolution, the end of Colonial Britain, the birth of America, holy wars, bestseller lists dominated by heretical religious and pseudo-scientific and intellectual texts and mass production of errors, hysteria, etc.

The driving force being the belief by mankind that they, based on information, knowledge and intelligence available to them, were masters of their destiny and could predict and influence their fate.

Given the fact that that revolution was a storm compared to the coming tsunami, I can only wish the coming generation luck — and fun.

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Processing the processor

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