Chapter IV
Infoxication 2.0

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reviews the issue of information overload, introducing the concept of “infoxication 2.0” as one of the main downsides to Web 2.0. The chapter describes some of its potential effects on the learner, on the one hand, and puts forward some solutions to deal with the informational and communication barrage worsened by Web 2.0 plethora, on the other. The review of the issue reveals that although the problem of information overload has existed for many years, the massive abundance of fragmented Web 2.0 informational and communicative resources for the language learner might become an obstacle, i.e. it is often difficult to find what’s useful. Two kinds of solutions are identified, those based on common sense and time management, and those based on technology agents such as RSS readers and especially the future generation of RSS mash-up tools. An emphasis is placed on the role of the teacher as the facilitator to provide the know-how on these tools.

INFOXICATION 2.0

The idea that computer technology introduced the age of information is completely misleading and fallacious. The printing press began that age (Dewar, 1998; Borgman, 2000; Darnton 2000a). But, computer technologies enlarged it exponentially. One of the most overwhelming features of present western society is the rapid sequence in which events, thoughts, and products occur due to technological progress (Bolter, 1984). If Google is handling the processing of exabytes of information with difficulty, users, consumers and producers of information (i.e. prosumers) are being surpassed by the amount of time devoted to absorb and, in the process, to purge gigabytes of information. After all, when searching for information what is actually being done is to filter contents in order to keep only what is interesting or that what is agreed with. Whatever it is that is being processed, e.g. audio, text or video, a conversation, a newspaper article or a TV documentary. The human brain, whose mechanisms science would like to emulate, is then responsible for processing, tagging and storing information on our cognitive servers.
But there is so much to see and read in the Web and time is too short. There is no Web 2.0 site that gives vouchers to get more time for free. Learners need to handle all that draws their attention in Web 2.0 without feeling dizzy or overwhelmed by their own information/communication eagerness. This eagerness to know more is not a new thing. As Shenk (1997) explained, human beings have always pursued information and contact, but nowadays the problem is not so much getting hold of it as it is differentiating what we expose ourselves to. It is that ancestral desire to know more and to communicate with others that took society to our current situation. Thus, the stimulus is not new — as will be seen later — but the available answers to that stimulus are indeed new in terms of quantity, quality and accessibility. In the current information glut, learners have to differentiate what is useful from what is not. At this point, it should be emphasized that in this chapter the discussion is not about deontological distinctions such as “what is good vs. what is bad” because who can define the inherent “goodness” of information? From a pragmatic viewpoint, this chapter will refer to that sort of information that is somehow useful to language teachers and learners. It is not concerned with the process of accessing information but the process of accessing by means of which we can find useful knowledge, whatever this may be.

In a normal studying day, a learner will have to pick up calls, read emails, read the press, chat through an Internet messenger, answer SMS, read Web feeds and carry out their job, as well as pay attention to their social and personal life. And although there are some mechanisms, which will be seen below, to help with some of these tasks, there is no way to control this flood of data that comes increasingly as a commodity. As Postman noted, “information is now a commodity that can be bought and sold, or used as a form of entertainment, or worn like a garment to enhance one’s status. It comes indiscriminately, directed at no one particular, disconnected from usefulness; we are glutted with information, drowning in information, have no control over it, do not know what to do with it” (Postman, 1990, para. 27). What could Postman’s view be now, 18 years later, when there are millions of Web pages, blogs, wikis, and social networks?

The University of Berkeley (Lyman, 2003) attempted to quantify in bytes the information available in our society. Their first attempt dates from 2000 (with data from 1999) and their most recent attempt was in 2003 (with data from 2002). It might be interesting to know if the reason why there have not been further attempts was the tsunami of information caused by the wide adoption of blogs (a significant application of Web 2.0) in 2004. In any case, the numbers identified by the 2003 study are already staggering — all production information in various formats for the year 2002 occupies a trillion and a half gigabytes of storage or about 250 MB per person. However, from the amount of information produced in 2002, “only” 1.75% came from Web pages. For example, email generated much more information with 8% of the total. But, although talking about these figures creates a certain impact on us, it will not help us see the whole picture (Brown & Duguid, 2000), because “storage” does not mean importance, or “volume” value. Some times figures lead to “tunnel vision.”

Web 2.0 is said to be a fuzzy concept that has been carrying a lot of hyperbole (JISC, 2007; Spool, 2007) since the moment it was introduced by D. Dougherty (O’Reilly, 2005). However, when Berners-Lee (IBM developerWorks, 2006) argues that Web 2.0 is a jargon term nobody can grasp and that provides no advance compared to Web 1.0 technologies, his reasoning is questionable because, nowadays, with Web 2.0 tools, non tech-savvy people can create and distribute content on the Web without needing to become experts. Web 2.0 is not a piece of software or a tangible thing, but a conceptual framework or approach with different characteristics, as shown in Table 1 (O’Reilly 2005; JISC, 2007; Spool, 2007).
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