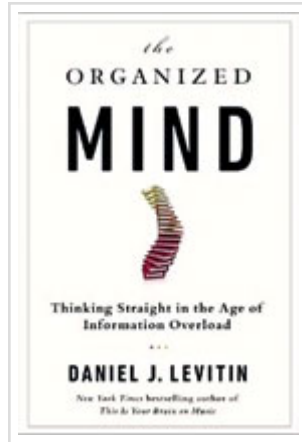


Wednesday, 08 October 2014 14:52

Learning how to organize information overload

Written by [Jeff Minick](#)



Twenty-five years ago, while under a good deal of pressure and stress, I began noticing I was forgetting things. I would tell a customer in my bookstore about a novel and then found I couldn't dredge up the name of the author. I grew concerned enough to ask informal advice from a local physician, who suggested ginkgo biloba. (This didn't work: I kept forgetting to take the pills).

Finally I realized that the trouble was not with my memory but with the world we all live in, a world in which we are drenched in electronic media and frequently more commitments than we can handle. This disease I will call here Dysfunction by Electronic Distraction, or DED for short.

This malady — information overload — is new in the last 20 to 30 years. Think about it. Sally, a middle-class woman living in Waynesville in 1900, has for her entertainment books, the newspaper, perhaps some magazines, conversations with her friends, and music played by herself or someone else. With the exception of the summer tourists, Sally and her five children see the same people every day. Her husband, a physician, did take her on their honeymoon to Paris, but otherwise Sally rarely travels. Her husband is thinking of buying an automobile, but given the nature of the roads, wonders whether that is practical.

Now compare Sally to her great-great granddaughter, Jade, living in Waynesville in 2014. Jade has also married a doctor and is very familiar with the town, but there the similarity to Sally ends. She has only two children, but spends a good portion of her afternoons and evenings driving them from soccer to music lessons, from dance to the church's youth group. During these drives she listens to the radio while her children plug into their iPods. At home she works online while the children attend school, designing and managing websites. In the evenings, Jade and her husband watch television after the children have gone to bed. They have vacationed not only in Europe but have also traveled frequently to the beach, made a long crosscountry trip across the United States and have watched countless movies.

In a single day's trip to Asheville, where this family eats supper at a Thai restaurant, hangs out at the drum circle, and wanders through the downtown streets, Jade will see more strangers in four hours than Sally saw in a year. In a single day on the computer, Jade encounters more information than her ancestor would have met with in months. (This is not to say that Sally didn't feel stress. She lived in an era when stepping on a rusty nail could lead to death).

Like Jade, we all suffer — some more, some less — from information overload, particularly information brought to us by electronic media.

It is this stress, this overabundance of information, which Daniel J. Levitin addresses in *The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload* (Dutton Publishers, 2014, 497 pages, \$27.95). In this walloping fat book, Levitin, a neuroscientist and statistician, explains in clear language how we think, the effects information overload has on our thinking and ways we can help our brains handle the chaos the world brings daily to us. He cites numerous studies and experiments dealing with this subject, shows the reader how much of what we believe true is false (multi-tasking, for example, is generally harmful and counterproductive), and gives readers specific ways to make changes in their lives.

In his chapter "Organizing Our Homes," for instance, he explains why we rarely lose our cars but often lose our car keys. It has nothing to do with size: the keys move with us, and the car stays in place. I was pleased to learn that my own system for not losing keys (store them in a specific place) or glasses (buy several duplicate pairs) were among his many recommendations. He touts the use of paper for keeping notes and appointments, and specifically recommended

keeping three 3-by-5 five cards handy for jotting down ideas and obligations. After reading this suggestion, I bought some 3-by-5, put them on the desk by my computer, and have found the system works better than described.

“Organizing Information for the Hardest Decisions” is one of The Organized Mind’s more intriguing chapters. Here Levitin looks at medicine and disease, and the often irrational way we, and sometimes our doctors, approach treatments. Levitin is a scientist — he regards the use of the scientific method in the last few centuries as one of mankind’s greatest achievements — and he advocates the application of this method to our medical problems. His discussion of prostate cancer and what treatment the patient should pursue is typical of his book. Using statistics once again, he raises many questions about the use of surgery for this cancer.

Other chapters in The Organized Mind cover such diverse topics as organizing the workplace, our social lives and even the education of our children. To each of these and the other discussions Levitin brings clarity, simplicity, humor and science.

The Organized Mind has won a permanent spot on my bookshelves. I will be returning to it again and again, both to learn its finer points and to remind myself of the value of organization and of approaching problems with Levitin’s inquiring eye.

(Jeff Minick is a writer and teacher. His first novel, Amanda Bell, is available at regional bookstores and on Amazon. He can be reached at minick_0301@gmail.com.)

The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload by Daniel J. Levitin. Dutton Publishers, 2014. 497 pages.

AROUND THE WEB

WHAT'S THIS?

Salesforce

See How the Salesforce1 Platform Helps You Build Apps Faster [Demo]

Bossip

Freaky Genetics: 13 You Wouldn't Have Gussed Were So Fine In Their Heyday

VentureCapital News

And the Best Stock for 2015 is

DraftKings Fantasy Sports

Golf Fan Becomes Millionaire After Johnson's Missed Putt

ALSO ON SMOKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

Dispute over Cherokee pay raises headed for court 2 comments

Waynesville bans smoking on sidewalks 18 comments

Waynesville wades into dumpster war 1 comment

Rep. Meadows ousted from chairmanship 1 comment

0 Comments

Smoky Mountain News

1 Login

Recommend

Share

Sort by Newest



Start the discussion...

blog comments powered by Disqus

Read 1917 times

Last modified on Wednesday, 15 October 2014 14:53

Tweet 0

Like Be the first of your friends to like this.

