

*Feeding
Your Soul in
a Post-Truth
World*



THE WISDOM PYRAMID

BRETT McCracken

“The foolishness of the world sometimes feels overwhelming. *The Wisdom Pyramid* lifts that fog away, revealing just how full God’s world is with goodness, truth, and beauty. By turning to these sources, in proper order, the wise will find folly fading into the background, and the world will look like—and be—a different place. Wisdom, as this book reminds us, is right there in front of us if only we will turn our eyes upon it.”

Karen Swallow Prior, author, *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books*

“One of the most important books I’ve read this year! What if you woke up to discover you’d been eating only Doritos and Oreos for a year? When it comes to our ‘information diet,’ *The Wisdom Pyramid* reveals most of us essentially have been consuming junk food—with an ensuing onslaught of personal and public health crises. McCracken is like a doctor who not only diagnoses the source of our cultural malady with precision but also prescribes the cure: a change in how we consume knowledge that can promote healthy wisdom and love of God.”

Joshua Ryan Butler, Pastor, Redemption Church, Tempe, Arizona; author, *The Skeletons in God’s Closet* and *The Pursuing God*

“Brett McCracken’s *The Wisdom Pyramid* models the discernment he asks readers to practice. Thoroughly biblical, it is also informed by a wide range of sources of truth, beauty, and goodness. From Augustine to Jacques Ellul, Reformed theology to pop music, historic Christian hymns to modern poetry, McCracken models how to wade through our daily deluge of input, form unhurried habits of attention, and grow into the patience and humility of godly wisdom. I imagine this book becoming essential reading for families, student groups, and churches.”

Jen Pollock Michel, author, *Surprised by Paradox* and *Teach Us to Want*

“It has been said that ‘we make our tools, and then our tools make us.’ Engaging a wide cross section of insightful analyses, Brett McCracken offers profound wisdom about how we have more information, less truth, and a shrinking capacity for identifying truth. Well-informed, vividly illustrated, and aimed toward solid answers, *The Wisdom Pyramid* is a must-read.”

Michael Horton, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California

“The first time I discovered Brett McCracken’s wisdom pyramid diagram, I knew he was onto something. I used it the next Sunday. Lots of people talk about it. Why? Because Christians desperately need a balanced diet of information. This book is amazingly helpful at both diagnosing a problem in contemporary Christianity and offering a holistic solution. *The Wisdom Pyramid* is clarifying and convicting. It’s a must-read guidebook for discipleship in our information-saturated age.”

Mark Vroegop, Lead Pastor, College Park Church, Indianapolis; author, *Dark Clouds*, *Deep Mercy* and *Weep with Me*

“In an age of perpetual distraction, hurried commentary, and shallow conclusions, we’re quickly losing our aptitude and appetite for wisdom. Brett McCracken’s book is a much needed antidote for the dangerous ethos of the day. A compelling call to reorder our lives and reorient our hearts and minds around the shape of biblical wisdom—loving, listening, and looking to God—*The Wisdom Pyramid* is essential reading for anyone who longs for a more meaningful journey of faith.”

Jay Y. Kim, Lead Pastor of Teaching, WestGate Church, San Jose, California; author, *Analog Church*

“The digital revolution has transformed—not tweaked—the fabric of daily life. Never has it been easier to gain attention, or discover entertainment, or obtain knowledge. No wonder we’re addicted. But Google is a pitiful substitute for wisdom. Indeed, if we’re not careful, life online will make us aware of everything and wise about nothing. That’s why I’m so excited for Brett McCracken’s antidote to the inverted priorities of our age. If you live on an island without WiFi, pick a different book. Otherwise, *The Wisdom Pyramid* is for you. Few things reinvigorate the soul, after all, like exchanging the stultifying air of a Twitter timeline for the fresh sea breeze of an excellent book. And this is an excellent book.”

Matt Smethurst, Managing Editor, The Gospel Coalition; author, *Deacons and Before You Open Your Bible*

“It is genuinely disturbing to consider how we are being shaped by our current forms of information intake. Brett McCracken’s *The Wisdom Pyramid* is a godsend—a pathway back to sanity and health. I believe that the proposal offered in *The Wisdom Pyramid* is as important for our mental and spiritual health in the modern world as a proper diet is to our physical health. On top of that, this book is beautifully written, winsome, actionable, and hopeful. Buy a copy for yourself and lots more to give away!”

Gavin Ortlund, Senior Pastor, First Baptist Church of Ojai; author, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*

“As a mother, I want my four children to develop the habits they need for a life of wisdom. They are quickly growing up into adults who will have to navigate for themselves the constant clicks and pings of life in our global, digital, information age. And so, I want their childhoods and teenage years—and our family life as a whole—to be intentionally formed by things that are both true and lovely. Although it’s not specifically a parenting book, *The Wisdom Pyramid* is a gift to parents, giving readers the essential tools to establish habits and priorities for a life of wisdom. This is a helpful book, and it’s also a hopeful book. It’s helpful because Brett McCracken writes biblically and insightfully on every page. It’s hopeful because it ultimately reveals the wise life to be the very good life.”

Megan Hill, author, *Praying Together and A Place to Belong*; Editor, The Gospel Coalition

“In an age of post-truth and information overload where Christians are constantly persuaded by AI algorithms and anecdotal absolutes, Brett McCracken winsomely pushes us past verified checkmarks and Facebook fact-checkers to bring us to the God who sits over wisdom and truth.”

Thomas J. Terry, Director, Humble Beast; member, Beautiful Eulogy; Lead Pastor, Trinity Church of Portland

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BRETT McCracken

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To Jeff McCracken, who taught me to love wisdom

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Introduction

AN UNWISE AGE

*Wisdom cries aloud in the street,
in the markets she raises her voice;
at the head of the noisy streets she cries out;
at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:
“How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?
How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing
and fools hate knowledge?”* PROVERBS 1:20-22

OUR WORLD HAS MORE and more information, but less and less wisdom. More data; less clarity. More stimulation; less synthesis. More distraction; less stillness. More pontificating; less pondering. More opinion; less research. More speaking; less listening. More to look at; less to see. More amusements; less joy.

There is more, but we are less. And we all feel it.

We have vertigo from the barrage coming at us from every direction, every day. We are nauseous from the Tilt-a-Whirl nature of a constantly changing, always unstable world described in (often contradictory and whiplash-inducing) feeds of fragmented and partisan news. Our ears are bleeding from the screeching multitudes

who daily assault our senses. Everyone has a megaphone, but no one has a filter.

Our eyes are strained, brains overstimulated, and souls weary. We're living in an epistemological crisis. It's hard to know if anything can be reliably known. We are resigned to a new normal where the choice seems to be: trust everything or trust nothing. Or maybe the choice is: trust nothing or trust only in yourself—a seemingly logical strategy, but one that sadly only inflames our epistemological sickness.

How can one flourish in a world like this? How can one fortify one's immunity and be healthy amidst a contagion of foolishness whose spread shows no sign of stopping? How can Christians become storehouses of wisdom in this era when more and more sickly people will be looking for a cure?

Better Habits of Information Intake

This book proposes that we need a better diet of knowledge and better habits of information intake. To become wise in the information age—where opinions, soundbites, diversions, and distractions are abundant, but wisdom is scarce—we need to be more discerning about what we consume. We need a diet comprised of lasting, reliable sources of wisdom rather than the fleeting, untrustworthy information that bombards us today; a diet heavy on what fosters wisdom and low on what fosters folly.

You might remember the old “Food Pyramid” from your childhood. First published in the US by the Department of Agriculture in 1992, the Food Pyramid was designed to help people understand the folly of eating only french fries, soda, and candy—and the wisdom of eating grains, fruits, and vegetables. The Food Pyramid was a brilliant visual guide for healthy eating habits, offering guidance for how many servings of each food group helped form a balanced diet.

We need something similar for our habits of information intake. We need guidance for how to daily navigate the glut of information available to us, an ordering framework for navigating the noise and the mess of our cultural moment. We need a “Wisdom Pyramid.”

But before we get to the pyramid’s practical guidance for “eating” well in the information age (part two of this book), we first need to understand the nature and sources of our sickness (part one). How did we get here?

The New “Post-Truth” Normal

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic exposed the severity of the epistemological crisis we face in the digital age. As the new virus spread globally, public health experts and government leaders naturally struggled to understand the nature of the contagion and how best to contain it. But the speed with which information—good, bad, and ugly—spreads in today’s world meant that imperfect data, errant projections, hastily written analysis, and contradictory recommendations were spread confidently and quickly, resulting in a disaster of information every bit as dangerous as the disease itself. Whatever you wanted to believe about the pandemic and the “stay at home” restrictions issued by governments, there were articles, studies, and experts you could find online to defend your view. The result was a deepening cynicism and uncertainty about pretty much everything.

COVID-19 didn’t create these frightening information dynamics, but it was a crisis made worse because of them. It was really 2016 when the extent of our epistemological crisis became apparent. That was the year Donald Trump’s election to president in the US and “Brexit” in the UK stunned experts and accelerated feelings that the world was entering a new, unpredictable phase driven more by rage than reality, more by fear than facts.

As a result, Oxford Dictionaries declared “post-truth” the international word of the year in 2016, defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”¹ The new “post-truth” normal was underscored in early 2017 when *Time* posed the question, “Is Truth Dead?” on its cover, designed in such a way to mirror a *Time* cover from 50 years earlier which posed a more foundational question: “Is God Dead?”² These two covers, a half century apart, tell an important story. Without God as an ultimate standard of truth, all we have are “truths” as interpreted by individuals. *To each their own. You do you.* It’s no wonder we are now as confused as we are. Do away with God, and you do away with truth.

Our Mental and Spiritual Sickness

I recently spoke to a group of college students and asked them two questions. First: “How many of you have a smartphone?” All forty hands in the room went up. Second: “How many of you would say your smartphone has made you a better, happier, healthier person?” Three hands went up.

Generation Z, or *iGen* as psychologist Jean Twenge has dubbed them, are living their lives through phones. And they are not happier. With lives characterized by ever-present screen time, texting, and social media, *iGen* has subsequently been defined by rising rates of depression, loneliness, anxiety, sleeplessness, and suicidal ideation.

“It’s not an exaggeration to describe *iGen* as being on the brink of the worst mental-health crisis in decades,” wrote Twenge,³ who assembled a vast array of research to support this thesis in her 2017 book *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us*. The title says it all.

Twenge shows in her book how rising rates of mental-health challenges among iGen started spiking in the years following the debut of the iPhone in 2007. The lines on various mental illness graphs became steeper when smartphones became ubiquitous. Surely that is not a coincidence. And it's not just iGen who is increasingly sick from the toxins of our digital age. Mental illness is rising across the board. The number of Americans diagnosed with major depression has risen by 33 percent since 2013, as shown in a report from Blue Cross Blue Shield in 2018.⁴ Though rates are rising most rapidly among teenagers, every age group is seeing a rise. And it's not just an American problem. Depression is now the leading cause of disability worldwide, with over 300 million people suffering from it across the globe.⁵

Research also shows Americans are increasingly unhappy. The year 2017 marked a new high in unhappiness in America, according to the Gallup-Sharecare "Well-Being Index." A record twenty-one states saw their well-being scores decline in 2017, and for the first time in nine years no state's score improved by a statistically significant margin over the prior year.⁶

People are also increasingly lonely. Cigna's "2018 U.S. Loneliness Index" found that just under half (46 percent) of Americans always or sometimes feel alone, with the highest levels of loneliness among Generation Z and Millennials. Loneliness "has the same impact on mortality as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, making it even more dangerous than obesity"⁷ and is increasingly regarded as a public health crisis by governments around the world. In 2017 the UK became the first government to appoint a "Minister for Loneliness," followed by a comprehensive, £21.8 million "loneliness strategy" to address the crisis.⁸

Our cultural sickness in the digital age is real and growing, and there are signs it is affecting our physical health too. After increasing

for most of the last sixty years, US life expectancies started decreasing after 2014 and are still on the decline—largely due to rising rates of suicide and drug overdose.⁹ But statistics, national surveys, and well-being indexes are one thing. The day-to-day, experiential realities of living in this diseased environment are another. To some degree or another we all feel infected.

Nausea, Addiction, and Other Ailments

I feel the sickness constantly. When I open Twitter and see the latest array of vile name-calling, self-righteous ranting, and virtue-signaling, I get squeamish. When I find myself meandering on my phone—scrolling through Instagram, clicking random links, checking sports scores, or whatever—I often feel removed from my body, lost in a digital rabbit hole. Even as I write this chapter, the phone on my desk has lured me into its web probably a dozen times. Why? How do I stop this? How do I resist checking my phone first thing in the morning, last thing at night, and multiple times each hour in between? The questions trouble my mind, as they probably do yours.

The sickness I feel—which so many people feel—is akin to that of the slot machine addict. We've been conditioned in a Pavlovian way to keep putting proverbial coins in the machine. The dings and flashes of our push notifications give us dopamine hits that keep us hooked, as they were engineered to do. We want to see who pinged us, what people are saying about our photos, and what's getting the mobs riled up today. It's terrible for us, and we know it, but like other vices—alcohol, tobacco, sugar—it's addictive.

There are other symptoms I experience. I find myself skim-reading books now, or I find myself reading a few pages of a book, then something on Wikipedia, then a few more pages of the book, then

Twitter, and so forth. Then there is the headache-inducing anxiety of response-demanding notifications—the never-ending pings from text messages, Facebook messages, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, Slack, Voxer, MarcoPolo, Asana, LinkedIn, email, and various others. It's the feeling of swimming upstream and never making progress.

These and other ailments prompted me to write this book. Having experienced the sickness in myself and seeing it in others, I want to champion a better way—a way to be sane and centered and virtuous in this crazy world. I want us to be discerning in an age of distraction. But before we get to the medicine, we must first understand the causes of the sickness.

Three Habits Making Us Sick

We must examine our daily diet of knowledge intake. It can be nutritious, making us wise and shrewd, more able to ward off intellectual infections and spiritual afflictions. But it can also be toxic, making us unwise and more susceptible to the lies and snares of our age.

Below are three poor habits of informational “eating” that are particularly prevalent in today's world, habits contributing to our sickness. The next three chapters will examine each of these poor habits in more depth, but here they are in brief.

1. EATING TOO MUCH

Just as eating too much of anything makes us sick—stomachaches, indigestion, or worse—too much information makes us sick. And nothing characterizes the Internet age quite like “information overload.”

Have a question about the Bible? Google it, and there are hundreds of answers. Need a video tutorial for how to install curtains? There are tons of them on YouTube. (Trust me, I watched at least five of

them.) Looking for the best croissant in Paris? Try searching Yelp, TripAdvisor, or countless other websites that have an opinion.

In theory, the vast repository of information at our disposal is a wonderful thing. In practice it's often paralyzing. Even with Google's algorithmic "ranking" of search results, it's overwhelming to sift through the glut. For example, every mommy blogger and baby-whispering guru has a different recommendation for sleep training. Whom do you trust? Whose method actually works? The lure of the all-knowing Internet promises to clarify, but often it just complicates.

It's the problem of limitless space. Whereas physical stores and communities are bound by limitations—a supermarket can only stock so many brands of coffee, and a family only has so many opinions about what to cook for Thanksgiving—the Internet does not have any of those limitations. For coffee, Thanksgiving recipes, and anything else, the options are extensive. Again, in theory, it's freeing! In practice, it's frustrating. How do you choose the best option among so many that are undifferentiated, untested, and—aside from user-submitted reviews—unvetted?

The "limitless space" nature of online media has also created a situation where "news" channels must find content to fill 24 hours a day, seven days a week, resulting in a diminishment of what qualifies as "newsworthy" (e.g., filling an hour with live car chases). On the Web, not only is there the expectation of daily, fresh, "breaking news" content, but there is fierce competition for clicks. Desperate to stand out, websites are motivated to use incendiary headlines and other tricks to collect coveted clicks by any means necessary. The result is content that is often rushed (a hot take on yesterday's controversy), random, reckless, or even distorted to spark short-term controversy rather than long-term wisdom.

In the competitive landscape of the digital age, the “food” of information is not getting more nutritious; it’s veering in the direction of junk food. Doritos and Skittles will always get more clicks than spinach. And so we walk down the buffet line of social media snacks and online junk food, daily gorging ourselves to the point of gluttony. Unsurprisingly, it is making us sick.

2. EATING TOO FAST

When you inhale food in a rush you often pay for it later. However convenient it may be, “fast” food is generally not the most nutritious. Most of the best food, both in nutritional value and overall taste, is prepared and eaten slowly. As with food, so it is with information.

We live in a harried age. Events that dominated headlines one week are forgotten the next. Social media favors what is #Trending at any given moment but has no incentive to circle back to last month’s societal conundrum, let alone last year’s. The Internet is a medium of *now*. Its memory is short; its shape ever changing. To navigate life online is to always be playing catch up: reading the article everyone is sharing on Facebook, following someone’s Instagram story before it disappears. If you don’t respond to your friend’s text within 20 minutes you might jeopardize the friendship. If you are a “thought leader” and you don’t weigh in on the social media outrage of the day, you might lose your thought-leader status. Whether in hot-take clickbait or well-timed Twitter threads, fortune favors the fast on the Internet. It doesn’t favor wisdom.

Such a pace has no time for critical thinking. When we are conditioned to move quickly from tweet to tweet, hot take to hot take, it’s all we can do to skim the thing, let alone read it with careful, critical thought. Scholars have found that the “junk food” nature

of information intake online is rewiring our brains, such that our cognitive abilities to think carefully and critically are being eroded. “In a culture that rewards immediacy, ease, and efficiency,” writes literacy advocate Maryanne Wolf, “the demanding time and effort involved in developing all the aspects of critical thought make it an increasingly embattled entity.”¹⁰

This is why “fake news,” viral misinformation, and conspiracy theories are increasingly problems. Speed often leads to errors. It makes us susceptible to falling for false reports and passing along misinformation. And it’s not just amateur bloggers and Facebook posters who are susceptible to this. Even society’s most esteemed experts and hallowed institutions are vulnerable to the mistakes that come with commenting or reporting on something faster than it can be understood. If the *New York Times* can fall into the Internet speed trap of too-hasty and inaccurate reportage, who can be trusted? If the Centers for Disease Control doesn’t provide reliable information on the dynamics of a contagion and how best to contain it, who does? Over time our skepticism about all sources leads us to turn inward, trusting only in ourselves—which brings us to our third major bad dietary habit.

3. EATING ONLY WHAT TASTES GOOD TO ME

If we only ever ate our favorite foods, most of us would be sick or dead. I love almond croissants and chocolate chip cookies (especially paired with a cup of black coffee!), but a diet consisting only of this would land me in the hospital. So it is with our information diet. We might be tempted to consume only material we like and have a taste for, but that will leave us sickly. Sadly, this is exactly what many of us do in today’s hyper-individualistic, choose-your-own-adventure world.

The Internet is built around *you*. Google search; social media algorithms; recommendations from Siri, Alexa, Netflix, and Spotify; and even the creepy artificial intelligence that now finishes your sentences in email writing: all of it is tailored to *you*. In theory this is amazing! What's wrong with a world that revolves around *you* and your particular preferences and proclivities? A few things.

First, when everything revolves around you and your tastes, it's only going to be awesome if you know exactly what's good for you. And we usually don't. Consider the build-your-own pizza restaurant trend. You go down the line and pick exactly what you want on your pizza: the spicy marinara sauce, sausage, pepperoni, olives, red onions, garlic, ricotta, mozzarella, maybe some pesto drizzled on top. Whatever suits your fancy. But in my experience (and maybe I'm just a bad pizza maker), the "perfect pizza for me" almost always ends up being a disappointment. Generally I would have been better off simply trusting the expertise of the chef, allowing someone with actual culinary wisdom to create a pizza I'd be sure to enjoy. Furthermore, if it's always only up to me to build my own pizza, I'll likely only stick with flavors I know and like, never venturing into new culinary territory or expanding my palate.

The second problem is that when every individual is living a totally unique, customized, perfectly curated "i" life, it is harder to find commonality with others. We start losing the ability to be empathetic, unable to connect with people because their experience of the world—the news they consume, their social media feeds, and so on—is different from ours in ways we can't even know. We are all living in our own self-made media bubbles, and no two are the same. Part of the reason society is increasingly divisive is that we can't have productive conversations when everyone comes to it with their own set of "facts," "experts," and background biases, having been shaped

by an information diet completely different from anyone else's. And when we can't relate to others, we retreat further into our individualistic, self-referential bubbles, which is not an environment where wisdom can grow.

A Healthier Diet

So what do we do about these bad dietary habits that are poisoning our souls? Shouldn't Christians, as followers of the man who called himself "the truth" (John 14:6) and said "the truth will set you free" (John 8:32), be leading the charge to recover truth and model wisdom in a post-truth age?

Some Christians have suggested the cultural situation is so dire, and the malforming momentum of the digital age so unstoppable, that the best strategy is to withdraw. In order to avoid infection by the contagions of the digital age, we should unplug and form alternative communities somewhere, like the monks in the Dark Ages. If we want to remain salt and light for future generations and be carriers of Christian wisdom beyond this troubling era, we need to hunker down and wait it out, lest we lose ourselves in the onslaught.

So the logic goes. And it makes some sense. In my more cynical moments, when I see the disturbing tendencies in my own knowledge-intake habits and fret about how my sons will fare in such a climate, I too am tempted to throw my phone down the garbage disposal and chuck my computer off the roof. I sometimes dream of building a L'Abri-style knowledge institution in some beautiful desert or mountain landscape, full of books and free of phones.

But then I remember that throughout Christian history, followers of Jesus haven't run *away* from the sick for fear of getting infected themselves; they've stayed *with* the sick and tried to help them. From

the Christians who cared for their pagan neighbors suffering from the devastating plagues of the early Roman empire to medical missionaries Nancy Writebol and Dr. Kent Brantly (who in 2014 contracted Ebola while treating victims of the disease in West Africa¹¹), followers of Jesus have done what Jesus did. Rather than avoiding the leper, the prostitute, the opioid addict, and the homeless schizophrenic, Christians have moved toward them. Rather than saving themselves in escape, they sacrificed their safety in service.

This is what we must do in this era of epistemological sickness. Yes, to stay in this toxic information environment is to risk becoming further infected by the ailments that already plague us. But to leave is to abandon the lost to an even darker lostness.

The world needs wisdom desperately, truth that is unshakable and foundations that are solid. Only Christianity provides this sort of wisdom, and it's exactly the medicine our ailing culture needs. In order to bring the light of Christian wisdom to the darkness of our unwise age, however, Christians must recover habits of wisdom in their own lives. We need a diet built around knowledge intake that actually cultivates wisdom. We need for our mental and spiritual health what the Food Pyramid was for our physical health: guidance for what to eat and what not to eat and in what proportions, so we can become more healthy and strong.

This is what *The Wisdom Pyramid* is about. It's a plan for stabilizing a sick society by making Christians wiser: God-fearing, trustworthy truth-tellers and truth-livers. Salt and light. This is what we are called to be. This is what the world desperately needs us to be.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why does it seem like there is an inverse correlation between information and wisdom (“Our world has more and more information, but less and less wisdom,” p. 11)?
2. How have you personally felt mental and spiritual sickness in the digital age?
3. Of the three poor habits of informational “eating”—too much, too fast, too focused on me—which do you struggle with most?

Part One

**SOURCES OF
OUR SICKNESS**

Chapter 1

INFORMATION GLUTTONY

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

*Where is the knowledge we have lost in
information?* T.S. ELIOT, *THE ROCK*

THE EXPONENTIAL EXPLOSION OF information in the “information age” is mind-boggling. Consider a sampling of the numbers. In 2019, *a single minute* on the Internet saw the transmission of 188 million emails, 18.1 million texts, and 4.5 million videos viewed on YouTube.¹ By 2020, there were 40 times more bytes of data on the Internet than there are stars in the observable universe. Some estimates suggest that by 2025, 463 exabytes of data will be created each day online—the equivalent of 212,765,957 DVDs per day.² What even is an *exabyte*? Well, consider this: five exabytes is equivalent to all words ever spoken by humans since the dawn of time.³ In 2025, that amount of data will be created every 15 minutes.

Here’s the craziest thing: It’s all in our pockets, just a few clicks away. Our phones are now encyclopedias. Libraries. Universities. Universes. But as convenient as it is to have such access—answers to any question

we might have, results for any painting or video we want to see, umpteen resources for whatever we might want to research—the glut of information online is also overwhelming. And it is not making us wise.

Just as too much food makes a body sick, too much information makes the soul sick. Information gluttony is a real problem in the age of Google—its symptoms are widespread and concerning. Here are five of them.

Symptom 1: Anxiety and Stress

Too much of anything causes problems for our health. This is as true of the information we take in as it is of the foods we consume. The information bombardment we increasingly face—characterized by nonstop swiping, scrolling, viewing, listening, reading, texting, and multitasking from morning to night—is creating stress in our brains and contributing to rising levels of anxiety. Our brains are shockingly adaptable and resilient, but they have limits.

Today's frenetic information landscape is making our brains busier than ever: the information triage that our over-burdened brains must constantly perform naturally drains huge amounts of energy. Constant multitasking also drains energy: making a dinner reservation on Yelp between replying to mom's text, sending a work email, and watching a "must-see" video a friend just shared on Facebook within the span of five minutes. This sort of extreme multitasking, notes neuroscientist Daniel Levitin, overstimulates and stresses our brains:

Asking the brain to shift attention from one activity to another causes the prefrontal cortex and striatum to burn up oxygenated glucose, the same fuel they need to stay on task. And the kind of rapid, continual shifting we do with multitasking causes the brain to burn through fuel so quickly that we feel exhausted and disoriented

after even a short time. We've literally depleted the nutrients in our brain. This leads to compromises in both cognitive and physical performance. Among other things, repeated task switching leads to anxiety, which raises levels of the stress hormone cortisol in the brain, which in turn can lead to aggressive and impulsive behaviour.⁴

Another way the information glut causes stress and anxiety is that we burden ourselves with massive amounts of unnecessary and often troubling knowledge. When we are physically sick, we search WebMD to find answers and usually only find more to worry about. As if our own struggles and family complexities were not emotionally burdensome enough, our Instagram and Facebook feeds pull us into the pleas, rants, and emotional vortexes of hundreds of others throughout the day. The constant news notifications of Amber Alerts, deadly tornadoes, measles outbreaks, school shootings, “suspicious activity” in our neighborhoods (thanks to apps like NextDoor), and all manner of horrific crime headlines accumulate in our consciousness, burdening our brains with anxiety about the mounting number of ways the world can kill us. Our FitBits, diet apps, and other health gadgets provide information about our bodies that can be helpful in moderation but that can easily become an anxiety-fueling obsession.

It's not that information of this sort is always bad or unhelpful. It's just that the cumulative effect of too much information—so easily and constantly accessible to us—creates a burden that our minds and souls were not created to bear.

Symptom 2: Disorientation and Fragmentation

The information barrage comes at us each day in disconnected, undifferentiated, all-over-the-place ways. Our social media feeds—no respecters of logical flow or the need for synthesis—embody this. Open

your Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram feed now, and you'll see this: a movie trailer next to an article about abortion; a photo from a friend's Texas road trip followed by someone else promoting their podcast.

It naturally leaves our heads spinning and—over time—our hearts battered and ultimately numb. It's obituaries next to baby announcements, cry-for-help laments next to “look at my best life!” vacation photos. Sports scores next to Augustine quotes. Worship music next to snake-chasing-iguana videos. John Piper sermons between sessions of Fortnite and Duolingo language learning. In the words of Arcade Fire, it's “Everything Now!”

In addition to causing cognitive dizziness, this indistinguishable array of information erodes our ability to distinguish between the trivial and the truly important. Over time we come to value information more for its spectacle—infotainment—than for the complex realities it signifies. Our news feeds are the amusement parks, penny arcades, and vaudeville stages of the digital era.

Media critic Neil Postman saw this coming in the 1980s, when he observed that televised news had become a sort of variety show of disconnected amusements meant to keep viewers tuned in:

“Now . . . this” is commonly used on radio and television newscasts to indicate that what one has just heard or seen has no relevance to what one is about to hear or see, or possibly to anything one is ever likely to hear or see. The phrase is a means of acknowledging the fact that the world as mapped by the speeded-up electronic media has no order or meaning and is not to be taken seriously. There is no murder so brutal, no earthquake so devastating, no political blunder so costly—for that matter, no ball score so tantalizing or weather report so threatening—that it cannot be erased from our minds by a newscaster saying, “Now . . . this.”⁵

In addition to these numbing and desensitizing effects, the constant hum of our information feeds fragments our lives. Instead of being present with our families, we are present with the hordes demanding our attention on email, text, Voxer, WhatsApp, Messenger, and umpteen other communication platforms. Instead of being present in the places where we live, we are present in the crises across the world and the trending debates on placeless Twitter. Our feeds bring the world and all its chaos into our minds, splitting our attention in a hundred different ways.

We weren't made for this. Writing a half century ago in *The Technological Society*, French Protestant theologian Jacques Ellul observed:

[Man] was made to go six kilometers an hour, and he goes a thousand . . . He was made to have contact with living things, and he lives in a world of stone. He was created with a certain essential unity, and he is fragmented by all the forces of the modern world.⁶

Ironically, as much as the information age (and its “global village”) promises to broaden our horizons and create healthy, integrated, well-informed global citizens, in reality it has had the opposite effect. The hyper-connection and over-awareness of a space-conquered world renders us fragmented and disconnected from *place*—the local contexts where we can know and be known and effect change to the greatest degree. As Ellul states, “The paradox is characteristic of our times, that to the abstract conquest of Space by Man (capitalized) corresponds the limitation of place for men (in small letters).”⁷

Symptom 3: Impotence

Our broader exposure to space, coupled with a diminished connection to *place*, leaves us feeling over-stimulated but under-activated. On any given day we are left inflamed by whatever grievances the Internet

has exposed us to, yet we are impotent to do much, if anything, about it. The endless conveyor belt of content puts more things on our radar in a day than people a century ago would encounter in a year—often about places we’ve never heard of and issues we didn’t know were issues.⁸

Postman talks about how our access to information and news from all over the world “gives us something to talk about but cannot lead to any meaningful action.” This is the legacy of the telegraph, he says: “By generating an abundance of irrelevant information, it dramatically altered what may be called the information-action ratio.”

Historically, Postman observes, information was deemed valuable insofar as it had the potential of leading to action. But the telegraph and later technologies rendered that relationship abstract and remote: “For the first time in human history, people were faced with the problem of information glut, which means that simultaneously they were faced with the problem of a diminished social and political potency.”⁹

Social media epitomizes this. Our feeds constantly inform us of far-removed news about which we have very little context and even less recourse to action: political protests in Venezuela, volcanic eruption in New Zealand, a snake found in a toilet in Florida, and so on. We can easily come to the point where we spend hours attending to headlines about things that will never affect us, debates about things we know little about, and problems we cannot solve. Meanwhile, as we are consumed by the “far away” dramas of our social media spaces, we neglect the tangible realities of our immediate place—the local news, proximate debates, and immediate problems we could more meaningfully address.

After the telegraph, Postman argues, “Everything became everyone’s business. For the first time, we were sent information which answered no question we had asked, and which, in any case, did not

permit the right to reply.”¹⁰ Social media, of course, gives us permission to “reply”—but to what end? We may have a sense that our participation is meaningful action, that it is *doing something*, but more often than not we are only adding to the noise, getting needlessly angry, and contributing more irrelevant information to our already overloaded, exhausted brains.

Today’s information landscape—which bombards us with grievances and trivialities we didn’t go looking for but nevertheless get sucked into—dignifies irrelevance and amplifies importance, argues Postman. It all adds up to an inflated sense of the world’s terribleness and an angst about our inability to do much about it.

Symptom 4: Decision and Commitment Paralysis

Another symptom of the sickness of information gluttony is a debilitating overabundance of choices. With literally everything at your digital disposal, how do you choose? Maybe you’ve experienced “Netflix Paralysis”—that moment when you’re trying to decide what to watch, but you freeze because there are too many options and no external guidance for your selection. You’re worried about wasting time, and the “will it be the perfect choice?” burden weighs heavily.¹¹

When everything is at our disposal and to our liking, we’ll naturally experience stress under the weight of FOMO (fear of missing out). Will we make the wrong choice? Of the fifteen shows your friends have talked about on social media, which one should you watch? These questions can be debilitating, adding to the anxiety that comes from what Alvin Toffler coined as “overchoice,” in his 1970 book *Future Shock*.¹²

Overchoice in the world of streaming video is no joke. The amount of new content being released every month on YouTube, Facebook, Hulu, HBO, Disney+, Netflix, Amazon Prime, and all the rest, is

mind-boggling. And as we become ever less able to make choices amid this overwhelming array of options, “suggested for you” algorithms will be ever-more adept at doing the work for us, eagerly serving up tailored “watch this next!” content that keeps us on the platform. Indeed, the stress of having to actively sift through viewing options tends to make us more passive, with little capacity for what Tony Reinke calls “spectacle resistance”: “Our lazy eyes and incurious gaze are happily fed by the spectacle makers. We no longer seek out new spectacles; new spectacles seek us out.”¹³

The effects of overchoice also pose problems beyond digital information. Wherever there is an abundance of options, we can struggle with commitment to anything. I see this often with church, for example. With a church “option” out there for every taste, preference, political leaning, and aesthetic (not to mention the option to just not go to church), the Christ-follower is positioned as a consumer whose attachment to a church is only as strong as a shopper’s attached to a brand. When our tastes change, so do our commitments. Just as on Netflix we might only make it through two episodes of a series, or 20 minutes of a movie, before we lose interest and switch to something else, so do we approach church and spirituality as a fluid thing that should adapt to our shifting needs and moods.

Philosopher Charles Taylor calls this abundance of spiritual choice “the nova effect”—an “ever-widening variety of moral/spiritual options”¹⁴—and it figures prominently in his account of secularity in his monumental work, *A Secular Age*. Riffing on Taylor, Alan Noble observes that “decision overload is as much a problem for spirituality as it is for digital multitasking . . . A distracted and secular age does this to us: we are cognitively overwhelmed by the expanding horizon of possible beliefs.”¹⁵

We are so overwhelmed with possible paths, possible sources of truth and theories of the good life, that we don't pick any path. Or we switch paths every few months. Or we cobble together our own just-for-me spiritual path, pulling bits and pieces of theology, philosophy, morality, and aesthetics from all manner of disconnected sources. Because we can.

Symptom 5: Confirmation Bias

Because there is limitless space online, every conspiracy theory, every quirky niche, and every cult-like community has a space to flourish. Whatever you believe, or whatever you might be tempted to believe, there is information online to back you up. And it's not just the dark web we're talking about here, where trolls and terrorists find reinforcement for their extremist beliefs. We're all susceptible to the path of least cognitive resistance: selecting sources that harmonize with our existing beliefs and don't complicate our paradigms or rile us up.

Who can blame us? It's why Americans traveling in a foreign country might opt to buy coffee in a Starbucks rather than at one of the (probably much better) local cafes. In noisy and cognitively overwhelming spaces, there is comfort in known commodities. Maryanne Wolf puts it this way:

We need to confront the reality that when bombarded with too many options, our default can be to rely on information that places few demands upon thinking. More and more of us would then think we know something based on information whose source was chosen because it conforms to how and what we thought before.¹⁶

In a world of increasing overchoice, this is an increasingly dangerous, if understandable, coping mechanism. We triage our personal information chaos by cultivating feeds full of voices of comfort rather

than voices that make our blood boil. Who has time or mental space for that? Unfollow.

Recognizing the twenty-first-century person's struggle to sift through the information glut and incentivized to make their platforms pleasant and not toxic spaces, social media companies make the confirmation bias problem worse through personalized algorithms. The result is unique-to-every-user feeds that create a world where no two people see the same information. We all live on islands of algorithm-fueled fantasy and confirmation bias. It's no wonder tribalism is on the rise. It's no wonder everyone is talking past each other.

Computer scientist Jaron Lanier, author of *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*, calls this algorithm-fueled fragmentation an "epochal development" that is making it harder to understand and empathize with each other.

The version of the world you are seeing is invisible to the people who misunderstand you, and vice versa . . . We see less than ever before of what others are seeing, so we have less opportunity to understand each other.¹⁷

The Devil Delights

It's easy to imagine the devil delighting in all this: angry tribalism, addictive triviality, amusing ourselves to death. As humans become more stressed, numbed, disoriented, distracted, and paralyzed by the impenetrable glut of information, chaos reigns. As chaos reigns, sin thrives.

It's interesting that the fall of man in Genesis 3 came about because of temptations of *knowledge*: fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In our age too, the lure of infinite, godlike knowledge wreaks havoc. I sometimes ponder that the logo on my iPhone—

a device that approximates godlike knowledge if ever there was one—is an apple with a bite mark. A nod to Eve’s original sin? An ode to humanity’s insatiable hunger for infinite knowledge? Perhaps.¹⁸ But just as for Adam and Eve in Eden, so it is for us: the desire to know everything only leads to grief.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Which of the “symptoms” of information overload discussed in this chapter do you experience the most?
2. What are some areas where you feel like access to too much information has been a burden or done more harm than good?
3. Why is it important to have a connection between information and action? Think of examples in your own life of where there is a connection between information and action, and where there isn’t a connection.

WE'RE FACING AN INFORMATION OVERLOAD.

With the quick tap of a finger we can access an endless stream of addictive information—sports scores, breaking news, political opinions, streaming TV, the latest Instagram posts, and much more. Accessing information has never been easier—but acquiring wisdom is increasingly difficult.

In an effort to help us consume a more balanced, healthy diet of information, Brett McCracken has created the “Wisdom Pyramid.” Inspired by the food pyramid model, the Wisdom Pyramid challenges us to increase our intake of enduring, trustworthy sources (like the Bible) while moderating our consumption of less reliable sources (like the Internet and social media). At a time when so much of our daily media diet is toxic and making us spiritually sick, *The Wisdom Pyramid* suggests that we become healthy and wise when we reorient our lives around God—the foundation of truth and the eternal source of wisdom.

“The foolishness of the world sometimes feels overwhelming. The Wisdom Pyramid lifts that fog away, revealing just how full God’s world is with goodness, truth, and beauty.”

Karen Swallow Prior

author, *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books*

“In an age of post-truth and information overload where Christians are constantly persuaded by AI algorithms and anecdotal absolutes, Brett McCracken winsomely pushes us past verified checkmarks and Facebook fact-checkers to bring us to the God who sits over wisdom and truth.”

Thomas J. Terry

Director, Humble Beast; member, Beautiful Eulogy;
Lead Pastor, Trinity Church of Portland

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