



The Age of Missing Information

Bill McKibben

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“Highly personal and original . . . McKibben goes beyond Marshall McLuhan’s theory that the medium is the message.”

—*The New York Times*

Imagine watching an entire day’s worth of television on every single channel. Acclaimed environmental writer and culture critic Bill McKibben subjected himself to this sensory overload in an experiment to verify whether we are truly better informed than previous generations. Bombarded with newscasts and fluff pieces, game shows and talk shows, ads and infomercials, televangelist pleas and Brady Bunch episodes, McKibben processed twenty-four hours of programming on all ninety-three Fairfax, Virginia, cable stations. Then, as a counterpoint, he spent a day atop a quiet and remote mountain in the Adirondacks, exploring the unmediated man and making small yet vital discoveries about himself and the world around him. As relevant now as it was when originally written in 1992—and with new material from the author on the impact of the Internet age—this witty and astute book is certain to change the way you look at television and perceive media as a whole.

“By turns humorous, wise, and troubling . . . a penetrating critique of technological society.”—*Cleveland Plain Dealer*

“Masterful . . . a unique, bizarre portrait of our life and times.”

—*Los Angeles Times*

“Do yourself a favor: Put down the remote and pick up this book.”

—*Houston Chronicle*

The Age of Missing Information Details

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Author : Bill McKibben

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From Reader Review The Age of Missing Information for online ebook

Ginny Colón says

One of my all-time favorite books and still so relevant today as we get more and more disconnected from the natural world around us.

Callsign222 says

This book is a little dated, as it chronicles TV from the 90's (only 100 stations), but other than that it's basic premise holds true... That we have little to no attention span, our collective memory has been truncated to what TV can show us, and we're all a bunch of suckers. The rest of the world, however, holds lessons and information far above and beyond anything else. I loved this book when I read it way back, and I still love it now.

Rachel Bayles says

If you need encouragement to turn off the TV, this is the book to read. Being reminded of all these jingles and useless tidbits of information floating around in my head was a nice illustration of the absurd.

Andrew Bourne says

What is most radical about this book is the experiment itself, it's personal, bodily, i guess almost self-flagellating, akin to the film *Super Size Me*. McKibben watched one day of cable television, all 100 channels, 24 hours a piece; that is, he gorged on about 2400 hours total of America's TV output from a single day in the early 1990s. It took months to view, and included shopping networks, infomercials, and televangelism. Torturous.

Despite this, he manages to make a quaint little book--a quality I DO NOT appreciate. It has all the mass media trimmings, sugar-coatings. I despise sugar-coatings. ...And his oft-invoked Christian sensibilities, brushed on there and here--Unpardonable, sorry.

Then there is a rather weak device he employs as a counterpoint to all the TV consumption: He goes camping. It's again sugary, even in its more Luddite and supposedly harsher moments. Both his environmental concerns, his technological inquiries, and personal reflections become just quaint paragraphs mauled under by the ongoing litany of familiar programming of years past. Even if his intentions are to criticize the media and to dish on us (the readers) some of the familiar media glut, what results is that the very inclusion of so many titles and celebrities eats away at his approach.

Further, it seems dated now. Yet further, the internet boom must have his eyes rolling like slot-machines. But, to his credit, he is clever, and I actually do agree with most of his assessments. That we are awash in the information age, but that the quality of that information is contestable. That we have disturbingly forgot how

to make basic things, grow food, and gainfully live with the Earth. That suburbia is an unsustainable and ridiculous endeavor born of privilege, destined to falter, producing citizens with skills attuned to nothing but itself. The lamentation of the apprentice system. The lamentation of agriculture. The lamentation of empathy.

But I'm afraid he thought this stuff was too apocalyptic, bad for sales, or bad for his own estimation of humankind. So he framed it in a rather soft quaint way, thus it reads too soft for my liking.

Mike says

I kind of gathered what the author was going to say when he laid out his strategy toward the beginning of the book. After plowing through all of the TV examples, sprinkled with tid bits of outside beauty journals, the only conclusion I had in mind is what he led us to. So TV blindly misuses its power to deliver information by sending us mediocre, subpar, and damaging information, instead of useful information. If I had to sit through over 1000 hours of TV **first** and then spend 24 hours camping, I would hate TV too.

The endless cycle of the TV that spits up and pukes in our sensory receptors everyday almost compare to the endless cycle of bad TV examples followed by the tranquil romance of camping outdoor McKibben writes in this book. Right around noon time, I could guess what the whole day will entail. I really had to force myself through the book. McKibben's lecture, talking-down-to-you voice made it even harder. My suggestion for others who want to read this book is to start with the first 3 and then skip to about Midnight.

That said, thinking about the book outside of the experiment's constraints leads me to a different conclusion. The experiment pitted how the way things were versus where it is and/or it's going. It seems like McKibben struggles with the vast influx of information and "The Age of Missing Information" was his way to deal with it. Older generations, as they move on, have a hard time dealing with youth and the eventual ceremonious torch passing of control. This book sounds like the rebellious retort to the process. For me, I couldn't help but hear my Dad saying things like 'the world is coming to an end' after an unsuccessful attempt to get 'the email' and get on 'the internets.'

Austin Ledger says

Very boring and drags on. Many 90s references that are hard to relate to.

Anthony says

Blast from the past,

Reading you can't help thinking, if you only knew what was just around the corner. But that makes this all the more effective at making the point and driving home the themes of what we miss with the overload of information from media and tech and become more distant from the physical experience and knowledge and wisdom of the natural experience

Ken says

The book is a long essay contrasting and analyzing a day relaxing in the wilds of the Virginia Adirondacks with the experience of absorbing one single day of 100 channels broadcasting on the local TV network. McKibben invited over one hundred of his friends and family to tape all of the programming on May 3, 1990, and he took a few weeks to watch it all, and he contrasts this experience with one day that he spent in the 'Great Outdoors'.

It's clever and insightful, and I thought it most interesting how the two experiences treat 'Time'. Obviously, television is lightening fast and does an excellent job describing reality about what is happening in the present moment. 'Chaos' and 'Disaster' are the bread and butter of the television experience, while the worst disasters, such as global warming, the consequences of poverty, or the degradation of the environment, move slowly, and the TV cameras don't see them. So the dedicated TV viewer is oblivious to these grave and catastrophic issues.

The book is filled with facts and observations on our Consumer Society, and McKibben makes the case that television has become the most important element in World Culture. The book is well-written, it won't require a lot of your time, but it will make you think.

Mark says

We have been told multiple times that we live in the age of information, that we are living through an information revolution, that we are taking in more information than any other culture at any other time in the history of the planet. True enough, says McKibben. But what information is it? Is it valuable, sustaining, enriching information or is it something else? The answer would be "something else."

Published in 1992, the Age of Missing information is McKibben's exploration of the information that we are receiving in massive quantities and compares that to the information we are no longer collecting as a culture. The experiment consisted of videotaping 24 hours worth of video tape from each of Fairfax, Virginia's nearly 100 cable television channels. McKibben then sat and watched all 2400 hours of television, every rerun, every infomercial, every sporting event and every music video. In contrast, he spent 24 hours hiking, camping, swimming atop a mountain near his home. The mountain provided information about limits, completeness, community, sustainability, and fundamental, ongoing happiness while TV provided information about insecurity (the goal of every advertisement is to make you feel insecure), individualism, and consumption as *the* route to happiness.

Joanna Weissen says

This book is amazingly bad. While the premise of the experiment is interesting and the author does have a few points about the nature of television I found thought provoking, most of the book is just the author espousing his views about nature, environmentalism, and sustainability. I did find the fact that these buzzwords have been in constant use for over 20 years both fascinating and depressing all at the same time. The author seems to have made choices in his life that he wishes we would all choose, and therefore decided to set them out for us to look at in this book. The result is a romantic view of living with less and a time when farmers farmed and we were all closer to nature. The problem is he ignores how technology has made our lives better by giving us more time that is not directly spent figuring out how to acquire food and shelter,

which used to be hard. Very hard. Separate from this is how TV affects us and society, but the author has jumbled it all together in one giant evil. This book was published at the height of "the sky is falling" terror of global warming, which is not looking to be the catastrophe that the author is making it out to be. While reading this book, the feeling I had more than any other was the feeling I wanted to throw up from the way the author's lifestyle was pushed so hard. Bottom line: if you agree with the author, you'll like this book because it will make you feel good about what you already think. If you don't, you'll realize that this is a horrible book full of logical holes.

Magdelanye says

Reading this book was rather like listening to a symphony composed in different keys, an elegiac flat minor interspersed with bursts of jangling sharp major, drawing on techniques of different centuries and conducted by the 3 stooges, all of them, at the same time. This metaphor is flawed, and maybe it would be more accurate to say it was like listening to a symphony with the radio on to the news, except for that the medium under the spotlight is television, and the whole scope of its programming.

The idea that I am trying to express is what I believe the author is intending to convey with this account of the dissonance and fragmentation that dominates modern life. For this is not a simplistic denunciation of the evils of modern civilization, tv in particular; nor is it a naive eulogium of times gone by. Yes, the point is strongly made that with all our technological advances we are not actually better off than our ancestors and that in fact we have lost something essential, but McKibben is no prophet of doom. Indeed, he is somewhat of a poor prophet who fails here to take into account the insidious and pervasive rise of the computer, claiming that "they have made surprisingly little difference to daily life outside the office. If people use them at home, they are either toys or efficient typewriters" p11 One gets the idea that he wrote this by hand, probably in pencil.

To be fair, this book was published in the early 90's, and who could have foreseen the world wide obsession with computer technology or predicted the craze which has turned into a dependence on the phone? McKibben's assertion that most of the major changes in the modern lifestyle occurred in the first half of the last century and that all further advances are mere refinements, has now also been proved wrong, but that does not take away the power of his main point, that for all the so called improvements in the mainstream standard of living, we are missing something vital that was available with a simpler way of life.

Indeed, it may be that McKibben's obvious love/hate relationship with tv gives him a more balanced perspective than someone who is utterly convinced (as I have been) that tv is right up there on the list of modern evils that would best be altogether put aside. He grew up with the box after all, and retains a certain fondness for the medium, somewhat like the nostalgia one might feel for kindergarden chums. In fact, somewhat ironically to me, he places cultural relevance on the fictional characters that are easily referenced by those that grew up with the tv on.

So what would we be missing if we skipped this book? Perhaps I can present my case that this is an important book by quoting him directly. But first, a break for station identification.

The cover of my hardback Random House edition is brilliant. A sheep is curled up in front of a couple of lions, a goat, a wolf perhaps an emu, and some kind of large colourful bird, gathered together in a night clearing. They all have a bewildered look as they raptly gaze at a small portable tv placed on a rock/

TV, and the culture it anchors, masks and drowns out the subtle and vital information contact with the real once provided. There are small lessons, enormous lessons... that may be crucial to the planet's persistence as a

green and diverse place and also to the happiness of its inhabitants-that nature teaches and TV can't. p23

The great push is always away from individual skill and engagement-a horse took all sorts of information and insight to handle, and a model T a little, and a Honda Accord virtually none. p34

If we're ever to recapture these fundamental kinds of information, it's necessary to start by remembering just how divorced from the physical world many of us have become. 26

...if we could block out the assumption that economic expansion will fill our lives with sunshine, then perhaps we could begin to talk realistically about our predicament. Because it is a predicament-on the one hand continued economic growth threatens the environmental stability of the planet, but on the other hand the system...rigged up requires constant acceleration or else it produces unemployment, misery, want. p118

The question is, does it make sense for us any longer-is it automatically cheerful news that the American economy is busily expanding? p108

... a society obsessed with the linear passage of time.... Viewed linearly, the rat race makes perfect sense-if there is a destination, you might as well get there first. But if, instead, you've internalized the seasons to the point where you realize that you're on a wheel, you might slow down a little-might decide you're going nowhere impressively fast. If you're on a wheel...speed is an illusion. p148

Music and dance, at their beginnings and throughout most of their history, were drenched with content. p132

Dance and music ordered time; they passed down the stories that bound civilizations together. 133

..we've managed to strip away meaning and information...p132

The question "What time is it?" has a different answer on the mountain and in front of the TV. And the answers, far from being frivolous, have great environmental, social, personal meaning-the mountain and the television aren't so much in different time zones as in different dimensions. p140

It rarely occurs to us how much intelligence about the world light erases. p222

The spread of artificial light, and the ability to continue all activity round the clock, eroded this sense much more radically...p142

We say "information" reverently, as if it meant "understanding" or "wisdom", but it doesn't. Sometimes it even gets in the way. p167

...tolerance by itself can be a cover for moral laziness. In a world with real and pressing problems, tolerance is merely a precondition for politics....p182

It's true we don't need all the old "traditional" values-but as a society we desperately need values. p183

Human beings-any one of us, and our species as a whole-are not all important, not at the centre of the world....if we insist on dominating everything, we'll create for ourselves an unlivable world....pp228/9

...the real world, one that was here before us. p229

That's why TV makes us feel so guilty sometimes. It's a time-out from life. p200

world once provided.

Karen says

I found the premise of this book interesting: the author recorded a day's worth of TV on over 100 channels, watched it all over the course of the next year, and pondered what we could learn about modern American society from it. It had some funny bits and some insightful moments about useless products, lack of community, distancing ourselves from nature even while watching nature documentaries, etc. Overall though I found it suffered from two major flaws:

- 1) It was published in 1993 and the author felt that future technology held no prospect of meaningfully changing people's lives. Given the internet revolution (and future changes I can't imagine now but that I feel sure will happen in the coming decades and centuries), I think that was a gross miscalculation on par with scientists who in the 19th century thought that there was little left to discover.
- 2) At various times I found the author annoying, repetitive, and preachy and this made even his interesting ideas sometimes difficult to get through.

Overall I would recommend the book, but it wasn't great for me.

Rick says

When it comes to providing information electronic media is best at reductionism, isn't it? Wonderful and timeless truths are reduced to soundbites for easy digestion. McKibben's book explores this concept mostly through the medium of TV. (The book is dated, that is, published in 1992, and so internet and cell phone culture is absent from his analysis.) We must find a way to get away from media and seek meaning and real information. Get back to nature? Maybe. Thoreau would agree.

Jenny says

I repurchased this enlightening nonfiction treatise with fond memories of my days in English 1A at Chabot College. Instructor Tom De Witt really knew how to "crack open our eggs," as he used to say.

Here, Mc Kibben's overall purpose would be lost if it weren't considered carefully; it's easy to become immersed in the colorful nostalgia of cable TV. However, the goal of this book is to present a study of what happens when one watches too much cable TV versus spends time with nature.

TV teaches the world that anything is possible. Without limits, we become passive, complacent, and lukewarm. We have nothing to overcome. TV shows only sensational, bite sized information: endangered animals prevalent, up-close and personal, for example, so we don't even take their endangerment seriously. In contrast, nature teaches us that life is slow, uneventful and lacking drama. Yet it's wholesome and requires us to develop real skills to overcome limits. And if we can't overcome the limits, we can respect them. In real life, there is both joy and suffering. On TV, there's only the good stuff. We don't have to wait for it. We can just turn the channel. But the problem is, there is no joy without suffering. No reward without labor. Loss of responsibility leads of passivity and lack of choice. TV keeps us from choosing, keeping us passive. Eventually, we lose.

Pages: 256; Publication Date: 1992; Part of my book collection.

James says

This book has been on my TBR list for a long time, but I only now picked it up. McKibben, an environmental writer who grew up with television, examines what "information" television truly provides us, and what it does not. The book owes a debt to Marshall McLuhan whose phrase "the medium is the message" brings a lot of McKibben's points home. TV narrows our focus, placing us as consumers in the center of everything, which is contributing to our environmental destruction. The book was written in the early 90's and some of its references are dated (although it's amazing how often Trump comes up), but its message is vital and interesting.
