Information Overload

Brief: If you provide too much information in your informative speech, the audience's ability to process the information you deliver will be challenged.

Learning Objective: Define information overload and anxiety and how they affect an audience.

Key Terms:
- Data: Individual pieces of collected information that may or may not be subject to analysis.
- Information anxiety: The gap between the information we understand and the information we think we need to understand.
- Information overload: The experience of receiving an excessive quantity of information that our brain system cannot fully process.

What is Information Overload?

Information overload is the experience of receiving an excessive quantity of information that our brain system cannot fully process.

While information overload is a symptom of the Digital Age, the term actually predates modern technologies. Nineteenth century sociologist Georg Simmel (1858–1918), one of the first social scientists to acknowledge the negative effects of information overload, hypothesized that the countless sensations of the modern urban world caused city dwellers to become jaded and interfered with their ability to react to new situations.

Information Overload and Informative Speeches

What does information overload have to do with informative speech preparation? Everything. To be successful, you must fulfill your informative speech goal—which means your audience must fully comprehend the information you choose to share about a particular event, process, object, or concept. If your audience suffers from information overload, their ability to process your information will be challenged.

Information Anxiety

Information overload can lead to information anxiety, which is the gap between the information we understand and the information we think we need to understand.

Author and TED Talk Founder Richard Saul Wurman suggests we can track the roots of information anxiety to a confusion about the word "information" really means: "The word inform has been stripped out of the noun information, and the form or structure has disappeared from the verb to inform. Much of what we assume to be information is actually just data or worse. Raw data can be, but isn't necessarily, information, and, unless it can be made to inform, it has no inherent value."

Keep the "Form" in Information

What's the difference between data and information? Data is considered "raw" because it's metaphorically "uncooked," making it difficult to "digest. " Data gains value when it becomes information. Data becomes information when it's organized into digestible chunks, metaphorically "cooked" into usable, structured, form.

Observing that we have a limited capacity to store current information in memory, contemporary psychologist George Armitage proposes that people can only process about seven chunks of information at a time. If you fail to organize your information into digestible chunks, your audience will quickly reach their capacity to process what you're saying.

Tips to Help Your Audience Information Overload and Anxiety

When you consider informative speech topics, think about whether you are able to break your topic into just a few main ideas. If your topic is too big or doesn't lend itself to sub-categories, narrow your topic or consider alternative topics.

Allow enough time for topic development, including topic selection, research, and selection of main ideas. Avoid procrastination. If you don't allow enough time to digest your topic into a usable form, how can you expect your audience to digest the information in turn?

Once you choose your topic, create a chart or other system for organizing your ideas. As you conduct your research and develop your ideas, add to your chart. Don't hesitate to rearrange ideas as necessary. Creating new ways to structure your topic indicates you're successfully digesting your topic.

From Concept to Action

Reflect on a time when you experienced information anxiety – perhaps during a class when a new topic was presented or at a new job with a steep learning curve. How did the information anxiety affect your performance? How did you handle the situation?

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