

## Information Overload

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Hi, I'm Jack, and this is Tom.

Tom graduated from high school in the 80s and wanted to be a biologist, but he had to work full time to support his family and could not finish his degree.

Now he works as a call center representative in healthcare. Tom is proud of his job. Tom's job is to help people understand their healthcare benefits and options. In his job, he has access to all the information he needs to help his clients and he's very good at it. Helping others with what he knows matters a lot to Tom. That's why he likes to stay informed about all kinds of things.



Tom remembers when getting information was much harder than it is now. Growing up, he would listen to the radio every morning. On weekends, he would visit the library to read newspapers and bring home flyers with information on all sorts of topics. Later, when he got a TV, every day he would wait for the nightly news program to learn all there was to know. If he wanted information, he needed to seek it out.

Not too long ago, Tom started to visit the library to read the news online and search for information and stories he was interested in.

But when Tom got a smartphone, it changed everything for him. Now, not only could he get online from any place, at any time, and get information about anything very quickly, information started getting to him without any effort on his part. Information is now everywhere.

Ever since Tom got his smartphone, he grew fond of Facebook and YouTube, his two favorite social media platforms.



Social media platforms and chat applications like WhatsApp, are online places for people to post information in the form of text, images, videos, and links to websites. The most important part of social media applications is the ability of its users to get and share information easily - sometimes too easily!

On social media platforms, users sometimes share information so quickly it reaches many people in a short amount of time, this is called "viral." Unfortunately, as Tom recently discovered, the platforms are also used by people to share misleading stories and trick people into sharing content that is not true. False stories are very popular for some reason, and often become viral.

Today, Tom still watches news on the TV, but he also gets a lot of information from social media applications like Facebook and YouTube. He also receives texts with links to information that his friends and family share with him. Tom is very happy that he has instant access to all kinds of news and stories at any time.



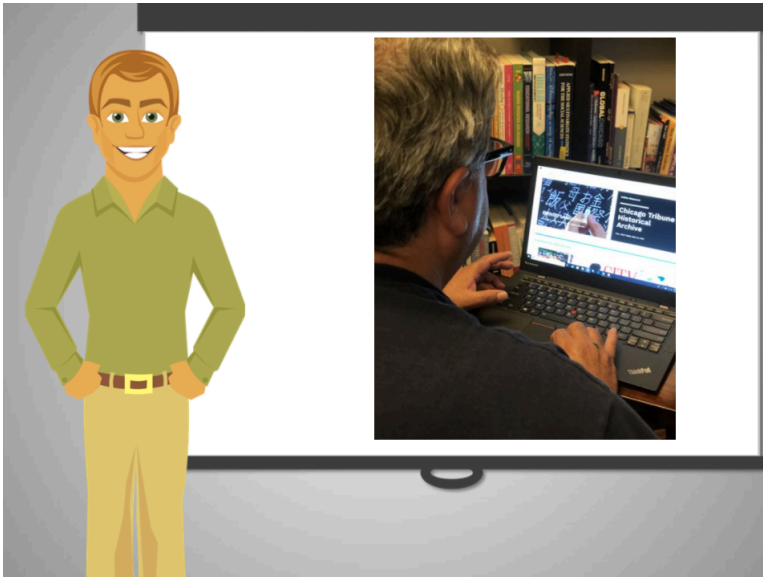
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While he likes the convenience of being informed in all those ways and at all times, lately, he has started to feel overwhelmed by the amount of information. He also noticed he has received too many unbelievable stories and he feels he is getting too much of the same information.

When Tom started to doubt the truth of the information he got on Facebook, he decided to go to the library to ask the staff about it.

At the library, he learned three important things that changed the way he looks at what he finds online.

First, anyone can create a website, make a meme, and write and share stories about whatever they want. Information can be posted online by anyone without any restriction.



Second, it is easy for people to hide their real identity online. Anyone can create a profile with a made-up name and a false picture, on the popular sites Tom and his friends use to get information. People with false profiles can also create groups and invite others to post and share information.

Tom follows some groups and engages in conversations with people he doesn't know personally. How can Tom be sure that the people posting information on his favorite social media platforms are who they say they are? Well, he can't!

And third, not every social media account belongs to a person. A person can write a program that creates "bots", automated accounts that post and interact with others. Some bots are designed to intentionally upset people, while others have unclear purposes; but all of them exist to generate the illusion of social activity.

Tom is ready to learn how he can better protect himself against fake profiles and bots. Let's follow Tom as he learns the skills and habits to become a critical consumer of online information.