

We're Paralyzed by Too Much Information

T.S. Eliot famously [lamented](#), “Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?”

The staff and I at Intellectual Takeout find ourselves frequently asking the same thing. Modern Western man is suffering from an information overload. There are now over one million new books published [each year](#) in just the U.S., [large newspapers](#) publish anywhere from 1,000 to 5,000 pieces of content per week, and it's now reported that [3 million blog posts](#) are written *every day*.

The exponential amount of information produced today is no doubt impressive. But it's also paralyzing.

And it's also harmful for a culture.

The preservation and flourishing of a civilization requires agreement upon [a canon](#) (from the Greek word meaning “rule” or “measure”)—a limited body of books, music, and art that have been consciously prioritized because of their formative influence upon a culture. The canon serves as a common base of knowledge and common reference point for the members of a society. It should be the job of educators within a culture to initiate students into this canon.

As a civilization advances, and knowledge increases, it naturally accumulates intellectual resources. There is a point, however, when this accumulation eventually becomes burdensome, and a culture loses sight of a canon, and its people become intellectually unmoored.

When that happens, it's time to take a step back, a deep breath, and have a sustained reflection and discussion about what cultural works matter most.

It happened in Ancient Greece, for instance. As historian Henri Marrou explains, Greek civilization became “increasingly top-heavy” as the years went by, and for the sake of education and spreading its influence, it eventually had to work toward a “canonization of the classics.”

A parallel example has periodically taken place in the history of the Roman Catholic Church with its saints. Every few centuries or so, the calendar becomes filled up with obligatory feast days of new saints, to the point that they distract from the celebration of the central mysteries of the Catholic faith. [When that happens](#), the Church prunes its calendar and removes the obligation from certain saints’ days.

I maintain that we’re at a similar point now in the West. Universal education and developments in technology have provided us with a previously unimaginable number of works of literature, music, and art, and historically unparalleled access to almost all of them.

The downside is that the members of Western Civilization are having a difficult time seeing the forest for the trees. They have lost sight of the canon of works that shaped their history and culture, and that provided them with a common source of understanding.

In the West, it’s time for a Great Reorientation.