

It's Over—We Lose

The first good advice about humans and the information we collect came from Plato, the father of Western Philosophy. He put it this way: “The unexamined life is not worth living.” We’re born with curiosity, and things just naturally seem to get better as we learn more about ourselves and where we are. But there’s a catch in all this, and few remember what the old Greek said about that.

So we built libraries and schools and learned to mechanically reproduce books. In the 18th Century, an English poet added a further clarification that has been repeated over the centuries. Alexander Pope warned, “A little learning is a dangerous thing; drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring.” In other words, the less you know, the greater the danger you are to yourself and others (especially if you’re practicing medicine or offering investment advice). We need to go beyond general knowledge and specialize. But Pope, unlike Plato, didn’t remind us of the catch.

So now the School of Information Management and Systems at the University of California at Berkeley has published a depressing scorecard titled “How Much Information? 2003.” It’s a study to

“estimate how much new information is created each year” and for which the group looked at “newly created information distributed in four storage media—print, film, magnetic, and optical.”

(<http://www.sims.berkeley.edu/how-much-info/>)

Apparently, Alexander Pope’s spring has erupted. Information increased by five exabytes in the year studied (2002). That’s **exa**, not **terabytes**. The authors explain: “Five exabytes of information is equivalent in size to the information contained in half a million new libraries the size of the Library of Congress print collections.” And that’s just the increase. In the last three years we have doubled all our information.

Can anyone “drink deep” from that cataract? And then there’s the catch—the simple truth that the more you know, the more you realize you don’t know. Put two lanterns in a dark forest, and the woods look pretty small. Turn on more and more lights, and it gets bigger and bigger, with so much more to learn.

Five exabytes in one year, and the process, by all accounts, seems to be accelerating. It’s over. The forest is just too vast. Maybe it’s time to scan all the books in the library and just turn it all over to the machines. ■